

Outline of our research brainstorming session, 3/6/2020

The conversation about research paper topics on Friday was helpful, I think. I wanted to give you a condensed, written version of what I thought its takeaways were.

- Write about something you like.
 - I did not say this in class but *do not google “research paper topics.”* Please. Doing that might help you in some classes, idk. But the outcomes will not be good for you in this class.
 - If there’s “no research” on “something you like,” email me about it. I *promise* there is, and I’ll help you find it.
 - Things I heard your peers might write about (these ideas are “taken”) which I hope might give you a sense of the expansiveness of what counts as “something you like”: cosmetology, Illuminati, Bermuda triangle, music for studying well, arctic animal life. All great topics.
- There is a difference between a problem and knowing that something is a problem. Research papers argue that there is a problem. They do not argue that we know there is a problem. Climate change is a problem. Knowing that climate change is a problem isn’t a problem.
 - So: “I argue that scientists have shown that climate change is a problem” = I know that it is a problem. That’s not a problem. You’re just repeating someone else’s research.
 - Consequently: your research paper will be *much* better if it takes a humanities-like approach, even if it’s on a “scientific” issue. “I argue that climate change denialist rhetoric manipulates public fear about taxation without representation”; “I argue that the rhetoric of climate change activists leaves out what is really at stake: the carbon tax”; etc.
 - I realize that “problem” has a negative connotation – we don’t like problems, we want to make them go away – but I’m not using it in that sense. “Problem” doesn’t mean “contentious public issue.” I’m using the word “problem” to mean “something that needs to be figured out.” You don’t *have* to figure it out (but you could), you just have to write that it might need figuring out. Do you want to research smiley faces, or cat videos? Go for it! But invent something problematic or unknown about them: “We don’t know what makes it psychologically appealing to text a smiley emoji instead of writing ‘I’m happy’”; “Everyone loves cat videos. But no one has considered the economic conditions they are made under.”
- The example of anti-vaccination advocates. “We” (people in the university?) know that scientists have shown that vaccines do not cause Down syndrome. “Anti-vaxxers are wrong because scientists say they’re wrong” is not an argument. The scientists made an argument, don’t repeat them. “The unspoken underside of anti-vaccination arguments is that humans born with Down syndrome are worth less than humans born without it” is an argument.
- One of *the most helpful strategies* for thinking of a topic if you’re stumped: change disciplines. Do not ask “what is the history of the civil rights movement,” ask “what is the geology of the civil rights movement.” “How do short stories depict vaccination?”

“How would an evolutionary biologist explain my favorite painting?” “Can astronomy tell us something about volcanoes on earth?” “Is there a sociology of flowers?”

- This means you have to do work. Again, “research” isn’t finding someone else’s “research” and reporting what they’ve found. It means reading a geology book, reading a book about the civil rights movement, and then generating an original thought, all by yourself, about how they might be related.
- Any “argument” that can be rephrased “X is good,” “X is positive,” “X is negative,” “X is interesting,” “We know X,” etc., etc., is *not an argument*.
- Above all, research papers are about *writing* and about *contributing* something to knowledge. Research is not about reporting *facts*. It’s about *contributing possibilities*. If you’re “wrong,” I don’t care. That has nothing to do with your grade. Maybe even try being wrong. Your grade has to do with your ability to think inventively and write effectively.