

No Room for Argument

Researching Politicized Topics as a Learner

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Roadblock

When writing a paper, beginner researchers often approach research and writing solely as a way to defend a favored point of view, not as a way to learn, to analyze, or to problem-solve.

Which of the following do you think is the best way to approach the task of writing a research paper?

- a. Start out knowing what you're going to say, then look for sources you can use to back yourself up, disregarding or arguing against information that won't help you make your case.*
- b. Develop a research question by reading about a topic of interest. Do some more reading to see what some ideas and answers are to this question. Come up with a defensible argument based on the information you encounter.*
- c. Write about something you know from experience, then find sources that say the same thing to insert into your paper.*

Roadblock

When writing a paper, beginner researchers often approach research and writing solely as a way to defend a favored point of view, not as a way to learn, to analyze, or to problem-solve.

Exacerbated by

- *misunderstanding the intent of instructions for research papers*
- *hyperpolarized political environment & online personalization*
- *cognitive bias*

instructions for papers

“at least four sources, Times New Roman, 12pt, double-spaced”

“one book, one website, two articles”

“find library sources that support your thesis to use in your paper”

research paper as product; student as consumer; information as commodity

hyperpolarized political environment & online personalization

Political polarization & partisan antipathy = highest in recent history
(Dimock et al., 2014 & Mitchell et al. 2014)

- number of sources consulted
- little overlap in sources on ends of political spectrum
- “unfriending” & blocking
- fake news, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories proliferate along partisan lines

“filter bubbles” & “echo chambers” = ideological isolation

cognitive bias

Reactance (Brehm, 1966)

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986)

Taber & Lodge, 2006: *gun control, affirmative action*. **Confirmation bias and attitude polarization**

Taber et al, 2009: *drug legalization, U.S. foreign aid, others*. **Disconfirmation bias and attitude polarization**

Greitemeyer, 2014: *video game violence*. **Biased assimilation and attitude polarization**

Funk et al., 2015: *genetically-modified foods*. **Rejection of scientific evidence**

Lewandowsky et al., 2013: *free markets: climate change, HIV & AIDS, smoking & lung cancer*. **Rejection of scientific evidence**

Rogers & Pilgrim, 1995: *childhood immunizations*. **Rejection of scientific evidence**

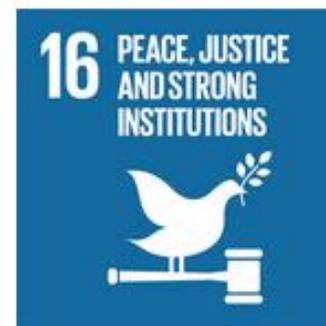
A solution?

Research topics: from the U.N.'s *2016 Sustainable Development Goals Report*

Assignment: The Research and Learning Narrative

Pedagogical approaches: critical information literacy & metacognition

Research topics: U.N.'s 2016 Sustainable Development Goals Report



Assignment

The Research and Learning Narrative

- Students write the stories of their research on a given topic
- A guided exploration through several genres of information
- Reflect on personal choices around information-seeking and “relevance”
- Identify researchable questions to ask about a topic, rather than constructing or defending arguments

Pedagogical approaches

critical information literacy

How do the structures and practices of the information ecosystem maintain or disrupt the status quo of unequal power relations? *(James Elmborg, Christine Pawley, Hope Olson, Sanford Berman, Emily Drabinski)*

metacognition & self-awareness

“thinking about thinking” (Flavell, 1979)

“know thyself”

Background sources (via Gale Virtual Reference Library)

Write a paragraph or two in which you reflect on why you selected these three particular sources from among the other options in the Result List.

Why these three sources and not others? Explain what led you to click on them, and then why you decided to stick with them rather than looking for something else.

Nonpartisan Government Agency Reports

Explain why you selected this report from the many options available. Compare it to a report that you looked at but didn't select.

What's the agency's mission or purpose? How does this report fit into this mission?

How did the authors collect the data on which the statistics in the source you've found are based?

Who do you imagine might use this report and for what purposes?

Nonpartisan Government Agency Reports

Select a specific data point or statistical statement from your source and reflect on its significance by answering one of these questions:

How does this fact change or reinforce the ways you've been thinking about these issues?

Does it help you think about ways you might eventually narrow down this topic into a researchable question?

For you personally, what is the significance of this statistic? Does it affect you?

In what ways can you imagine that this information matters in other people's lives?

'Current' Events (via CQ Researcher)

Write a paragraph explaining how you searched for these two reports.

In one or two paragraphs, reflect on the differences of these two reports and how they each treat the topic to which they pertain. Consider what counts as evidence.

Can you tell from the older report what event caused this issue to be considered a public concern?

Peer-reviewed, empirical, journal literature

Explain in detail how you searched and sorted. What were you expecting to find and how did that affect the search strategies you used? Did the “relevance” sort produce results you found to be relevant?

Identify the research question for each research article (aim or objective).

In the introduction or background sections, can you find any statements about what prompted these researchers to ask these questions? Why do they think this matters?

Explain what you understand about the way the researchers gathered their data (the research method).

Student Presentations

From your exploration and writing, what questions do you now have about this topic? Could any of them be the basis for a research paper?

Which source of information that you encountered through your exploration was most influential in shaping how you're currently thinking about your topic?

What did you learn in this class that will stick with you about engaging in research?

Students' 'Researchable' Questions

“How is wildlife affected by deforestation?” (*descriptive, not analytical*)

“What are the factors that cause children to drop out of school?” (*descriptive, not analytical*)

“Would the combination of initiative and incentive programs, for both wind and solar power, be efficient in providing all of New York with affordable and sustainable energy?”
(*analytical, problem-solving*)

Students said they learned:

“You can consult the scholarly record.”

“Research articles tell you *exactly* what was researched.”

“Think about why I want to include a specific article into my paper or project... now I always ask why I am picking this one over another.”

“Rarely, we will ever find exactly what we were looking for.”

Was this a useful solution?

- instruction: too abstract?
- “schooled” answers?
- 1-credit courses are supposed to be “easy”
- transformation in thinking about information and self

Feedback/Questions:

goo.gl/90c6dh

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