

TURNING TOPICS INTO QUESTIONS THE LITTLE RED SCHOOLHOUSE METHOD



I. WHY SHOULD WE TURN TOPICS INTO QUESTIONS?

STUDENTS WITH WRITER'S BLOCK OFTEN FIND PAPER TOPICS OVERLY GENERAL AND INTIMIDATING. IF YOU CAN TURN A PAPER TOPIC INTO AN ANSWERABLE QUESTION, IT MAY GIVE YOU THE GOAL AND STRUCTURE YOU NEED TO WRITE WITH CONFIDENCE.

The kind of questions valued by most college professors usually don't have a set answer. They may appear open-ended and vague. This is because your professors want you to wrestle with non-trivial questions that have more than one side, and no obvious answer. They virtually never think there is an "obvious," "right" answer.¹ However, although there is no "right" answer, professors know their subject well and expect that students choose questions carefully, and back up answers with evidence that is well presented, grounded in the course materials and believable. While there are no obviously "right" answers, some answers are not supported by the text and are implausible. If the question you have been asked appears "vague," you should try to formulate a more specific question that you will answer *within the guidelines of the original topic*. That is, your more specific question should still answer the key points of the assignment, just with more specificity.

II. TO FORMULATE A DEBATABLE QUESTION: TIPS TO HELP YOU LEARN TO POSE AND SOLVE A REAL, SUBSTANTIAL PROBLEM THAT IS WORTH SOLVING

1. Move from an interest to a substantial topic
 - list things you care about – gender, democracy, poetry
2. Pick a broad topic and then narrow it down
 - what broad topics do you care about: gender, democracy
 - narrow the topic down: e.g. the *tension* between loyalty to one's family versus the quest for honor
 - push yourself to get even narrower: homer's arguments regarding how to resolve the tension between loyalties to one's family versus patriotism
3. Move from the narrowed topic to substantial question:
 - next, Ask yourself the standard who, what, where and how questions
4. Categorize, rate and choose the best answers/questions
5. Explain what is interesting about relating the question back to the assigned passage
6. Name the new topic. identify the main point and why we care.
7. Formulate a "final" question. This is the question you will try to answer in your paper.

Please note: since this is only a brief outline of a specific method, I **highly** recommend that if you are suffering from Writer's Block or if you can't find a thesis, that you take this handout to the writing center and go through it with a tutor. All of the tutors in Reed's Writing Center are trained in this approach.

¹ M. P. Ryan, "Monitoring Text Comprehension: Individual Differences in Epistemological Standards," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 76, (1984): 250.