Picking a topic can be a bewildering experience, but it can be especially difficult when you don’t have a background in your topic area. One way to overcome this deficit is to simply “throw yourself” into a topic -- read widely, talk to experts, etc. -- but this can be time consuming. Fortunately, our brains process images much faster than text, and we can exploit this by exploring topics through images. We’ll look at two methods of doing this today:

Method #1: Google Images

Go to Google Images (http://www.google.com/imghp). Type in a general keyword about a topic you’d like to pursue (ex. “dogs”). Start scrolling through the images. When you see an image that captures your imagination, jot down a description of that particular image (ex. “guard dogs”, “puppies”, “dog bites”, etc.). Continue this process of picking out notable images, and jotting down descriptions of those images, until you have 4-5 interesting sub-images.

Once you have your sub-images, do a new Google Images search for each of those sub-images (ex. “guard dogs”). As before, scroll through the images and see which ones pique your interest. Eventually, you’ll discover an image which encapsulates the topic you want to research (ex. “bullmastiff guard dogs aggression”). Hopefully, the images will lead you to a place you otherwise wouldn’t have gone! Hint: Take your time, don’t be afraid to explore a little!

What is your general research topic? [write a description or some keywords below]
Context (Pt. 2)

Another difficulty in selecting a topic is settling on your research question. Your research question is an encapsulation of what you plan to research. Example research questions might look something like: “How have Barack Obama’s educational initiatives impacted American higher education?”, or “what evidence is there to support the theory that Francis Bacon actually authored Shakespeare’s plays?”, or “does the manufacture of cheap clothing overseas help, or hurt, the American middle class?”

The trick in selecting a research question is to ensure that your question isn’t too broad or too narrow. A question that is too broad (ex. “what is the state of American politics nowadays?”) will overwhelm you; a question that is too narrow (ex. “are Morgan County animal shelters applying an appropriate schedule of treatment and care to cats which are slated to be euthanized?”) will require original, in-depth, and time-consuming research. Try to pick a research question that can be answered with available resources, and which also won’t stretch you further than you’re prepared to go.

Method #2: Mind Map

A mind map is a visual representation of an idea, and allows you to trace an idea across a visual space. In this activity, go to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) and find an article which relates to your general topic (ex. “dogs”). Read through the article, and when something catches your interest, place the concept in your mind map (with your general concept at the center). As you add more concepts to your mind map, consider looking up new Wikipedia articles to further branch out your topic. Again, take your time, do a little exploration, and see if you can’t stumble on the perfect topic. You can draw your own mind map, or use the template below:

When you’ve settled on your topic, don’t forget to brainstorm some keywords for future searching:

Potential Keywords: __________________ / __________________ / __________________ / __________________ /