EN 121: Topic Selection - Google Images Method

Context (Pt. 1)

Picking a topic can be a bewildering experience. It can be made worse, though, when you don’t have a background in the topic area. One way to overcome this deficit is to simply “throw yourself” into the topic -- read widely, talk to experts, etc. -- but this can be time consuming. Fortunately, however, that our brains process images much faster than text, so today we’re going to try two methods of topic selection which involve images.

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, or interests you, jot down the subtopic that describes the image (ex. “guard dogs”, “puppies”, “dog bites”, etc.). Continue this process of picking out notable images, and jotting down associated subtopics, until you have 3-4 interesting subtopics.

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

Google Images Worksheet

What is your general research topic? [write some keyword(s) below]

Subtopic of Interest

Keyword(s) for Search

Subtopic of Interest

Keyword(s) for Search

Subtopic of Interest

Keyword(s) for Search

Subtopic of Interest

Keyword(s) for Search
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 could 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 ideas. It allows you to trace a series of ideas across a visual space. Ideally, when you’re creating a mind map, new ideas will come to the fore, which can subsequently lead your research down new and exciting paths. 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. As you add more concepts into 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 find a really well-suited topic. You can draw your own mind map, or use the template below:

When you’ve settled on your topic, don’t forget brainstorm some search keywords for future use.