

ging, he found some 1970s news clips from the student newspaper describing a student strike that paralyzed the school. The controversy fascinated him more than the building did, and he pursued the topic. He wrote a great paper.

If you're still drawing a blank, try the following exercise in your notebook.

EXERCISE 1.1

Building an Interest Inventory

STEP 1: From time to time I'll hear a student say, "I'm just not interested in *anything* enough to write a paper about it." I don't believe it. Not for a second. The real problem is that the student simply hasn't taken the time to think about everything he knows and everything he might want to know. Try coaxing those things out of your head and onto paper by creating an "interest inventory."

Start with a blank journal page or word processing document. Define three columns per page with the words below:

PLACES, TRENDS, THINGS, TECHNOLOGIES,
PEOPLE, CONTROVERSIES, HISTORY,
JOBS, HABITS, HOBBIES

Under each title, brainstorm a list of words (or phrases) that come to mind when you think about *what you know* and *what you might want to know* about the category. For example, for TRENDS, you might be aware of the use of magnets for healing sore muscles, or you might know a lot about extreme sports. Put both down on the list. Don't censor yourself. Just write down whatever comes to mind, even if it makes sense only to you. This list is for your use only. You'll probably find that ideas come to you in waves—you'll jot down a few things and then draw a blank. Wait for the next wave to come and ride it. But if you're seriously becalmed, start a new column with a new word from the list above and brainstorm ideas in that category. Do this at least four times with different words. Feel free to return to any column to add new ideas as they come to you, and don't worry about repeated items. Some things simply straddle more than one category. For an idea of what this might look like, see what Amanda, one of my students, did with this exercise (Figure 1.1).

CONTROVERSIES

Guantanamo Bay
Iraq War
Palestine vs. Israel
Beijing Olympics
Steroids in baseball
Racism/sexism in politics
Gender identity
Homosexual marriage
Death penalty
When is a person created?
Right to euthanasia
Vegetative states
Drinking bottled water
Is organic stuff better?
Does the glass ceiling still exist?
Why are people poor?
Religion in the U.S. government
Sex lives of elected officials
What makes people fat?
Evolution in the school system
Gas vs. ethanol
Sales tax on groceries

TRENDS

Bluetooth headsets
Ipods
Drinking coffee
Crocs shoes
Giant purses
Designer everything
Organic products
Green/eco consciousness
"Some disease" awareness
Celebrity spokespeople
Internet television
Pets as children
Going to prison
Adult-oriented cartoons
Model/actress/singer combo
High-stakes kindergarten
Myspace
Blogs
Cohabiting
White teeth
Specialized TV channels
Hardwood floors
Locavores
Wikipedia
Pink shirts for men
Heated car seats
Splenda
Energy drinks

JOB

Prison guard
Garbage man
Sewer cleaners
Undertakers
TV anchor
Hotel housekeepers
Rap stars
Child stars
Interior decorators
Manicurists
Tailors
Cobblers
Tour guides

HISTORY

The Holocaust
The Vietnam War
Ancient China
Who built the pyramids?
Why did the Aztecs die?
When did humans leave Africa?
What was President Washington like?
The Underground Railroad
Feudal Japan
Human sacrifices
Spanish Inquisition
Napoleonic wars
Stonecutter's guilds
Nostradamus
The Gold Rush
Immigrants to the U.S. in the 1900s
The Triangle Shirtwaist fire
The importance of the printing press
Hygiene habits in ancient Greece
Gender roles in ancient Egypt
Torture chambers
Foot binding
Pre-Christian religions
Canada's freedom from Europe

HABITS

Using a toothpick
Fingernail biting
Bouncing a leg
Verbal ticks: "so anyway..."
Wringing hands
Eating with mouth open
Chewing gum loudly
Laughing to oneself
Checking locks
Leaving cell phone on
Talking too loud
Nose picking
Hair twirling
Habits vs. superstitions
"God bless you"

FIGURE 1.1 Amanda's Interest Inventory

Allot a total of 20 minutes to do this step: 10 minutes to generate lists in four or more categories, a few minutes to walk away from it and think about something else, and the remaining time to return and add items to any column as they occur to you. (The exercise will also work well if you work on it over several days. You'll be amazed at how much information you can generate.)

STEP 2: Review your lists. Look for a single item in any column that seems promising. Ask yourself these questions: Is this something that raises questions that research can help answer? Are they potentially interesting questions? Does this item get at something I've always wondered about? Might it open doors to knowledge I think is important, fascinating, or relevant to my life?

Circle the item.

STEP 3: For the item you circled, generate a list of questions—as many as you can—that you'd love to explore about the subject. Here's what Amanda did with her topic on teeth whitening:

Are tooth whiteners safe?

What makes teeth turn browner over time?

How has society's definition of a perfect smile changed over time?

Are whiter teeth necessarily healthier than darker teeth?

Is it true that drinking coffee stains your teeth?

How much money is spent on advertising tooth whitening products each year?

What percentage of Americans feels bad about the shade of their teeth?

Do dentists ever recommend that people whiten their teeth?

Is there any way to keep your teeth from getting darker over time?

Can teeth get too white?

Why do I feel bad that my teeth aren't perfect?

Do other cultures have the same emphasis on perfectly white teeth as Americans do?

Are there the same standards for men's teeth and women's teeth?

What judgments do we make about people based simply on the color of their teeth?

How does America's dental hygiene compare with that of other countries? Is the "Austin Powers" myth really true?

The kinds of questions she came up with on her tentative topic seem encouraging. Several already seem “researchable.” What about you? Do any of your questions give you a hunger to learn more?

Other Ways to Find a Topic

If you’re still stumped about a tentative topic for your paper, consider the following:

- *Surf the Net.* The Internet is like a crowded fair on the medieval village commons. It’s filled with a range of characters—from the carnivalesque to the scholarly—all participating in a democratic exchange of ideas and information. There are promising research topics everywhere.

- *Search a research database.* Visit your library’s Web site and check a database in a subject area that interests you. For example, suppose you’re a psychology major and would like to find a topic in the field. Try searching PsycINFO, a popular database of psychology articles. Most databases can be searched by author, subject, keyword, and so on. Think of a general area you’re interested in—say, bipolar disorder—and do a subject or keyword search. That will produce a long list of articles, some of which may have abstracts or summaries that will pique your interest. Notice the “related subjects” button? Click that and see a long list of other areas in which you might branch off and find a great topic.

- *Browse Wikipedia.* While the online “free content” encyclopedia isn’t a great source for an academic paper, Wikipedia is a warehouse of potential research topic ideas. Start with the main page, and take a look at the featured or newest articles. You can also browse articles by subject or category.

- *Consider essays you’ve already written.* Could the topics of any of these essays be further developed as research topics? For example, Diane wrote a personal essay about how she found the funeral of a classmate alienating—especially the wake. Her essay asked what purpose such a ritual could serve—a question, she decided, that would best be answered by research. Other students wrote essays on topics like the difficulty of living with a depressed brother and an alcoholic parent, which yielded wonderful research papers. A class assignment to read Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* inspired Li to research the author.

■ *Pay attention to what you've read recently.* What newspaper articles have sparked your curiosity and raised interesting questions? Rob, a hunter, encountered an article that reported the number of hunters was steadily declining in the United States. He wondered why. Karen read an account of a particularly violent professional hockey game. She decided to research the Boston Bruins, a team with a history of violent play, and examine how violence has affected the sport. Don't limit yourself to the newspaper. What else have you read recently—perhaps magazines or books—or seen on TV that has made you wonder?

■ *Consider practical topics.* Perhaps some questions about your career choice might lead to a promising topic. Maybe you're thinking about teaching but wonder about current trends in teachers' salaries. One student, Anthony, was being recruited by a college to play basketball and researched the tactics coaches use to lure players. What he learned helped prepare him to make a good choice.

■ *Think about issues, ideas, or materials you've encountered in other classes.* Have you come across anything that intrigued you, that you'd like to learn more about?

■ *Look close to home.* An interesting research topic may be right under your nose. Does your hometown (or your campus community) suffer from a particular problem or have an intriguing history that would be worth exploring? Jackson, tired of dragging himself from his dorm room at 3:00 A.M. for fire alarms that always proved false, researched the readiness of the local fire department to respond to such calls. Ellen, whose grandfather worked in the aging woolen mills in her hometown, researched a crippling strike that took place there 60 years ago. Her grandfather was an obvious source for an interview.

■ *Collaborate.* Work together in groups to come up with interesting topics. Try this idea with your instructor's help: Organize the class into small groups of five. Give each group ten minutes to come up with specific questions about one general subject—for example, American families, recreation, media, race or gender, health, food, history of the local area, environment of the local area, education, and so forth. Post these questions on newsprint as each group comes up with them. Then rotate the groups so that each has a shot at generating questions for every subject. At the end of 40 minutes, the class will have generated perhaps 100 questions, some uninspired and some really interesting. You can also try this exercise on the class Web site using the discussion board or group features.

What Is a Good Topic?

A few minutes browsing the Internet convinces most of my students that the universe of good research topics is pretty limited: global warming, abortion rights, legalization of pot, same-sex marriage, and the like. These are usually the topics of the papers you can buy with your Visa card at sites like freeessays.com (yeah, right). These are also often topics with the potential to bore both reader and writer to death because they inspire essays that are so predictable.

But beginning with a good question, rather than a preconceived answer, changes everything. Suddenly subjects are everywhere: What is with our cultural obsession about good teeth? Is it true that lawnmowers are among the most polluting engines around? What's the deal with the devastation of banana crops, and how will that affect prices at Albertson's down the street? Are "green" automobiles really green? Even the old tired topics get new life when you find the right question to ask. For example, what impact will the availability of medical marijuana vending machines in California have on the legal debate in that state?

What's a good topic? Initially, it's all about finding the right question and especially one that you are really interested in (see box below). Later, the challenge will be limiting the number of questions your paper tries to answer. For now, look for a topic that makes you at least a little hungry to learn more.

Where's Waldo and the Organizing Power of Questions

For a long time, I thought school writing assignments were exclusively exercises in deduction. You start by coming up with

What Makes a Question "Researchable"?

- It's not too big or too small.
- It focuses on some aspect of a topic about which something has been said.
- It interests the researcher.
- Some people have a stake in the answer. It has something to do with how we live or might live, what we care about, or what might be important for people to know.
- It implies an approach or various means of answering it.
- It raises more questions. The answer might not be simple.

a thesis and then try to find examples to support it. This kind of writing starts with an idea and supports it with evidence, moving from the general to the specific. There's nothing wrong with this. In a lot of writing situations—say, the essay exam or SAT writing test—this approach makes a great deal of sense. But much academic research, at least initially, works inductively. You look for patterns in information that raise interesting questions, and it is these questions that redirect the researchers' gaze back to the information, this time more selectively and purposefully.

In other words, you start with a lot of data, form a question or hypothesis about the patterns in what you see, and then return to the data again, this time focusing on what is relevant. In this way, you get control of the information by looking at less of it.

The visual puzzles in the *Where's Waldo?* series of children's books is a great example of the power of good questions to manage information. As you know, Waldo, with his red-and-white-striped stocking cap and jersey, is hidden in a picture among hundreds of other people, many of whom look a lot like him. The challenge, quite simply, is to find Waldo in all of this data. Imagine, though, if the game didn't ask "Where's Waldo?" but "Where are the men?" or "Where are the women?" in the picture. Suddenly, much more information is relevant and the search isn't nearly as focused. A better question might be, "Where are the people wearing yellow?" That eliminates some of the data but still leaves a lot to work with. Obviously, "Where's Waldo?" is the best question because you know what you're looking for and what you can ignore.

Similarly, a good inquiry question will focus your investigation of any topic. Starting with an answer—a thesis or main point—before you do any research is efficient; it sets you on a steady march to a destination you already know. But beginning with questions, while sometimes a messier process, is a much more powerful way to see what you don't expect to see. Try the following exercise, and you'll see what I mean.

EXERCISE 1.2

The Myth of the Boring Topic

This exercise requires in-class collaboration. Your instructor will organize you into four or five small groups and give each group a com-