Research Topics:
Making an Argument

START WITH A TOPIC

A topic is a subject. A topic is something you might look up on Google. You cannot agree or disagree with a topic because a topic is an area of study, not an idea or position. You cannot prove a topic. For example, even if you don't think that Global Warming is real, you can't disagree with the *topic* "Global Warming." However, you might disagree with the *thesis* that "Global Warming is real."

Examples of Topics: The Civil War, Enzymes, Sigmund Freud, *Huckleberry Finn*, Stress

LEARN ABOUT YOUR TOPIC THROUGH RESEARCH

In most classes, you can do your research by reading. Usually, you should start with the readings assigned by your instructor, and then start looking for essays and articles on your own. Keep careful track of your readings. Research should surprise you. If research only confirms things you already knew, you need help from a professor or librarian. *Never* do the research after you have already written a paper. A good paper builds on the foundation of research.

DON'T MAKE THINGS UP

If you don't understand how writers or teachers reached their conclusions, you may think that they just made it up. You may feel inclined to make things up yourself. Never make things up.

ASK YOURSELF HOW YOU KNOW SOMETHING

Part of research is knowing which sources to trust and which sources to distrust. Be suspicious of information you find on Wikipedia, a blog, or a free newspaper. Use the library's resources to do your research.

CREATE A THESIS

A thesis is a statement that must be proved. A thesis makes a claim, or expresses an idea. You must be able to agree or disagree with a thesis. Your thesis should be the result of research, not a hunch or gut feeling. Not every idea that you can agree or disagree with will make a good thesis. For example, if you find your thesis uses generalized ideas or phrases such as "is important" or "is stupid," you are likely dealing with a bad thesis. A good thesis will give your reader an idea of what the paper will be about and how you will make your argument.

Bad Thesis: Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences is stupid.

Good Thesis: Neurologists reject Gardner's theories of Multiple Intelligences, though his ideas are still useful for educators.

Bad Thesis: Othello should have listened to Desdemona.

Good Thesis: Desdemona considers marriage a partnership of equals, while Othello considers his wife to be his property.

CHECK YOUR THESIS BY USING THE TOULMIN MODEL OF ARGUMENTATION

According to the philosopher Stephen Toulmin, every argument contains five parts: the claim, the reason, the warrant, the evidence, and the qualifier. Here is a sample thesis broken down into the parts that Toulmin identifies. Ask yourself if your thesis contains all of the parts of an argument.

Sample Thesis: Pell Grant funding should be increased for non-traditional students because it will allow more students to attend college.

Claim: The central point to be proved.	Pell Grant funding should be increased.
Reason: Why the claim matters.	Because it will allow more students to attend college.
Warrant: An often unstated link between the claim and reason.	It is good for more students to attend college.
Evidence: Relevant facts, personal opinions, or examples.	*This would be shown in the body of the paper.*
Qualifiers: Qualifiers narrow the claim.	For non-traditional students.

Last Updated 4/1/13

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