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I Don't Know What to Write About

It's the worst feeling in the world. You know you're supposed to be writing; your teacher just told you to get started. But where do you start?

Finding a good topic is one of the hardest parts of learning to write. And, unfortunately, every writer runs into it right at the beginning. Even if you do come up with a good topic for today, what about tomorrow? And the next day? And the next? Are you going to have to struggle like this every time a teacher asks you to write?

Probably.

No matter how many times you've come up with good topics before, you end up with the very same problem the next time you start a piece. And that's why you need strategies that will always give you many good topics to choose from.

One approach that seems to work well for many writers is the Topic T-Chart strategy. The idea is to make two lists at the same time based on opposites. Here are some examples that will help you find something good to write about:

- **Like-Hate.** Things you like and things you hate.
- **Typical-Unusual.** Typical experiences that happen almost every day and unusual experiences that have happened only once or twice in your entire life.
- **Fun-Have To.** Things you do for fun and things you do because you have to.
- **Regret-Proud Of.** Things you regret and things you are proud of.

You can use these lists over and over. (You can even use them in different classes and in different grades!) Try a couple of the ones suggested here or make up your own. In just a few minutes, you'll probably have enough topics to last an entire year.

Like-Hate T-Chart

Good writing comes from strong feelings. And strong feelings come from things we like and things we hate. Make a list of the things you really like and the things you really hate (no people on the “Hate List,” please!). If you’re honest about it, each topic will be something you have a lot to write about.

LIKE

Things I Really Like a Lot

(Think about your absolute favorites!)

HATE

Things I Really Can't Stand

(No people, please!)

Typical-Unusual T-Chart

Good writing comes from life experience. And the life experiences we know best are the typical things we do every day and the unusual things that happen to us maybe only once or twice in our entire lives. Either way, these kinds of topics make perfect things to write about.

TYPICAL

Regular, Everyday Experiences

(Sometimes the little things in life make the best topics for writing.)

UNUSUAL

Out-of-the-Ordinary Experiences

(Think of the highs and lows in your life, the times that aren't like all the others.)

Examples

Like



Hate

Pizza
The Internet
Ice cream
Music
Reading
My cat
Harry Potter
Soccer
Shopping
Candy

All vegetables
Homework
Science
Spelling tests
Getting dressed up
Cleaning my room
Rainy days
Being bored
Bowling
Golf on TV

Typical



Unusual

Waking up
School
Dinner
Practice trumpet
Soccer
Watching TV
Visiting grandma
Feeding my cat

Bike accident
Chicken pox
Broke my arm
Disneyland
Getting my 1st bike
Met Mia Hamm
Saw Wynton Marsalis
Getting presents
Getting grounded

Fun



Have To

Out to dinner
Movies
Holidays
Staying up late
Rollerblading
Halloween
Talk on phone
Soccer camp
Singing

Get my hair cut
Getting up early
Wash the dishes
Babysit brother
Get good grades
Practice scales

Regret



Proud Of

Not getting
Wynton Marsalis's
autograph

Missing my soccer
tournament cuz I
got grounded

Being mean to my
brother sometimes

My soccer Trophy

In 4th grade
when I got all A's

When I saved my
cat from that big
dog.

I'm good at math

T-Chart Tips

Save your T-charts. Each topic T-chart you create will have many different topics on it. Most people come up with 10-20 each time they do it. If you save your charts, you'll always have lists of ideas to go back to when it's time to write. By making and saving several different lists, you can generate enough topics to last an entire school year. This is great for you, but it's even better for your teacher. If there's one thing teachers dread it's hearing their students complain about not having anything to write about.

Pick only the best topics. Not every topic that shows up on a topic T-chart is worth writing about. Don't forget the three rules of topic picking: **(1)** *Pick topics you know a lot about.* You can't write well about something if you don't know much about it. **(2)** *Pick topics you have strong feelings about.* If you don't care about the topic, your audience won't care about it either. And, **(3)** *Pick topics that are appropriate for your audience.* Know who you're writing for and how to write to them in a way that will make them feel comfortable and respected. Every topic you pick to write about, whether it's on a topic T-chart or not, must meet all three of these criteria.

Putting something on both sides of the same chart. Is it possible to really like *and* really hate something at the same time? Yes, it is! For example, I really like teaching. It's incredibly rewarding for me to help kids learn. But sometimes, when the kids are acting up and I can't control the class, I feel like teaching is the worst possible thing I could be doing. Often, when something is really important to us, we have many different and even conflicting feelings about it. That's just human nature. It's also the nature of a great topic. If you feel like you want to put the same thing on both sides of a topic T-chart, do it. And then start writing about it. Topics that show up on both sides of the same chart are often the best topics we come up with.

Be specific if you can. You may write down that you like "movies." That's a great topic. But you'll probably get a better piece out of it if you think more specifically. For example, if you thought about which kinds of movies you liked best and wrote down "action movies," your writing would probably be more detailed and more focused. You can also use this approach to get more topics out of a single choice. If you put down "sports," for example, you might be able to come up with several different sports and write a different piece about each one.

Writing about the same topic more than once. Can you write about the same topic more than once? Of course you can. Professional writers do it all the time. However, they don't just write the same piece over and over because their readers would get bored and frustrated if they had to read the same thing every time. If you pick the same topic more than once, you need to write a different piece about it each time. Also, because you're still learning to write, it's better for you to try many different topics instead of picking the same ones all the time. However, all writers have their specialties, the topics they like writing about best, and you should have yours, too.

What's a Good Idea?

Some ideas are better than others. Just because it's on a list you made doesn't mean it's necessarily a great thing to write about. Sometimes you may want to consider things a bit more carefully before you start writing. To help you with that, here's a series of questions you can ask yourself about any topic you choose. How you answer these questions may help you discover that some of your topics are better than others.

Is the topic something you have strong feelings about? The degree to which you care about your topic is one of the strongest predictors of success with the finished piece. Your feelings about the topic affect your writing in three ways: **(1)** *The amount of effort of you put in will be greater if you care about your topic.* The extra effort will probably lead you to produce better work. **(2)** *Your voice will be stronger if you care about the topic.* Voice is the personal quality in a piece of writing, it's how your personality shapes the piece in ways that make it different from anyone else's. It's also the aspect of your writing that will be most interesting to the majority of your readers. **(3)** *You'll have a lot more fun writing a piece if you care about the topic.* The work will go faster and be more enjoyable.

Is the topic something you know a lot about? Writing is really two activities wrapped up into one. The first activity involves coming up with the ideas you plan to write about. The second involves writing those ideas down in ways that are interesting and understandable to your readers. The truth is that you can't do the second if you haven't figured out the first. If you don't know a lot about your topic, you have two choices: **(1)** *You can do some research and learn more about it,* or **(2)** *you can pick something different to work on that you know more about.*

Is the topic something you can describe in great detail? Details are the heart of any good piece of writing. Details are also what make your writing different from anyone else's. Without good details, most pieces are boring. Part of knowing a lot about your topic is knowing the little things about it that your readers probably don't know.

Is the topic something your audience will be interested in? Before you can answer this question, you have to know who you're writing for. In school, your audience usually consists of the other students in your class plus your teacher. But often we write for wider audiences, too. In either case, you have to know who your audience is and why they might be interested in the topic you've chosen to write about.

Is the topic something your audience will feel was worth reading? Your readers have to expend time and effort to read your writing. What do you have to say to them about your topic that will keep them reading all the way to the end, and make them feel like they got their money's worth when they get there?

Do You Have a Good Idea?

FEELINGS What are those feelings? How will you communicate them to your reader? Is there an important detail you want to emphasize so your reader will understand exactly how you feel?

KNOWLEDGE What are the main things you want to cover? What's the most important part of your piece? What's the one most important thing you want your audience to know about your topic?

DETAILS What are some of the important details of your topic? Why are these details important? How do these details help the reader understand your message?

INTEREST Who is your audience? Why will they be interested in your topic? What will interest them most? What does your audience need to know to understand and enjoy your piece?

VALUE What will your audience get from reading your piece? Will your audience learn something new? What will make your audience want to follow your piece all the way to the end?

Choosing Topics For Research

Way back when I was your age. I had to do many research papers. They were, without exception, awful pieces of writing. I had topics I didn't like or didn't know much about. I didn't know what doing research really meant. (I thought it had something to do with copying things out of encyclopedias and changing the words around.) And I certainly didn't know very much about writing.

My experience with research in school was, I think, typical of many students even today. I did state reports, country reports, animal reports, and famous people reports. I didn't enjoy it, I don't remember the information, and I never again used the skills I acquired. The whole process didn't make a lot of sense to me. And I never felt that I was learning very much.

Now, as an adult, I find myself engaged in research of one kind or another all the time. At the moment, for example, I have two projects going. In one, I am reading several books about the brain and memory so I can help kids retain more of what they study. In the other project, I am learning about building complex interactive web sites. This is more like the kind of research people do for their jobs. In fact, that's why I'm researching these topics, so I can do some new things in my work.

It's interesting for me to note that neither of these projects will require me to write a report. They will both require, however, the creation of something tangible. In one case, new teaching materials, in the other, a web site. Research always has some kind of output, some kind of finished product that the researcher has to be responsible for. But written reports of the kind we do in school are only one way to present our results.

For me, the allure of research revolves around problem solving. As I learn about how research is done in the world, I find this to be a consistent theme. At the root of it all is human curiosity. The need to know creates the problem the act of research seeks to solve. We all need to research the things we're curious about.

When I went to school, research involved the gathering up of facts and the presentation of those facts to the teacher in the form of a written report. Since the facts I gathered were already known, and since neither I nor my teacher had much interest in knowing them, the exercise was meaningless. In the world outside of school, it isn't just the facts that count. Facts are an important part, but not the whole. It is the meaning of the facts that makes the work worthwhile and the learning long lasting. And that only happens when we're solving problems we care about and satisfying our curiosity.

The Six Principles of Research

A matter of principles. Few people get through their entire lives without doing some research. Even if you manage to avoid it in school, you'll undoubtedly be faced with it in your adult life. So, if you're going to do research in school, you might as well do it the way people do it in the real world. Then, even if you don't like it, you'll still get an introduction in something valuable.

In the real world, research follows a set of six principles. These principles define what research is, how it should be done, and how it is evaluated. Even if you don't learn much doing research in school, you can still learn these principles. Knowing them will serve you well later on in your adult life.

Principal #1: The researcher is an expert in the field. We don't ask dentists to research industrial manufacturing methods, we don't ask accountants to study the human genome, and we don't ask graphic artists for their analysis of the economy. Researchers research the things they know best. You may not feel like a true expert in anything. But you do have specific knowledge in many areas: things you like, things you do for fun, things you are interested in, etc. Your home and family situations may also be helpful. When doing research in school, you don't have to be the best expert in the world, you just have to know more about something than your audience does. Regardless of how much you think you may or may not know about things, you must do your work in an area you are familiar with just like real researchers.

Principal #2: The topic is narrow and manageable. Most research has a very narrow focus. There aren't many people writing comprehensive histories of Europe or complete biographies of famous people. The reason for this is the time involved. It takes years, even decades, to write the history of an entire country or the biography of a famous person. And most school kids don't have that kind of time on their hands. Finding an appropriately narrow topic takes a bit of work. It might even take several days. But this is time well spent because if you settle on a topic that is too broad, it is likely that your research will take too long, and that your writing will be of poor quality. To help kids find just the right topic, I tell them to first pick something that matches a personal interest. Then we dig deeper and deeper into that topic to find possible sub-topics. We keep digging until we find something that seems just right. Sometimes the process looks like we're drilling down the levels of an outline: Sports >> Baseball >> Mariners >> Ichiro >> *Japanese players coming to America*. Now here's a topic that might be specific enough for us to work with. We started with "sports" and from there we had to dig down four more levels before we came to something small and focused. This is not uncommon. Starting from a general interest, you may have to dig down five or six levels or more before you find something small enough that you'll be able to research thoroughly and write about well in the short time you'll have to do your work.

Six Research Principles Cont.

Principle #3: The research answers specific questions. The best research answers very specific questions, sometimes only one. How does a drug inhibit the spread of cancer? How can a company reduce the cost of a product? What were the causes of The Great Depression? How do I create teaching materials that help kids remember what they learn? How do I build a really cool interactive website? Etc. So, after we find an appropriately narrow topic, we try to develop specific research questions that go with it: How many Japanese players are in the Major Leagues? How do they perform relative to other players? Why are Japanese players coming to the Major Leagues now instead of long ago? And so on. We may even come up with questions that lead the research in a slightly different direction: How have the events of September 11th affected the desire of foreign players to come to this country?

Principle #4: The audience is well defined. Research wouldn't be done if someone wasn't interested in it. Knowing who that someone is, and the nature of their interest, helps researchers focus their efforts on the right questions and the best presentation of the answers. In most cases, you'll be doing your research for your peers. But you may come up with different audiences like your family or other people in your community.

Principle #5: Neither author nor audience knows the result of the research. Researchers don't research questions they already know the answers to. Nor do they research things their audience already knows. If you presented something you already knew, no research would be involved. If the information you presented was already known to your audience, there would be no need to present it. This just means that you may need to do a little research on your audience before you get too far into researching your topic. Ask people what they know already about your topic and what they would like to know next.

Principle #6: Presentation matches purpose. To reach their audience most effectively, researchers use a variety of methods to present their results. Sometimes results are written in papers. But often they are presented in some kind of talk with handouts, slides, or other props. Sometimes researchers express their results in working models. More and more, research results are presented in hypertext documents on the web. Researchers do their research for specific purposes. And those purposes often have to do with how they want their information to be used. It is appropriate to present research in written form when we need to reach people who cannot hear us speak or who may need to use our written word as evidence to support their own research. We may reach our audience more effectively, however, if we make an oral presentation. If we intend our research to prove a particular point, or solve a tangible problem, we may want to present a model of some kind. Presenting our research on the Internet is a great way to reach larger audiences and to display our results in an interactive format. How you decide to present your results will influence the information you gather and the way you organize it for your audience.

When You Can't Choose

Choosing good topics when there is no choice. In an ideal world, you would get to work with any topics you wanted to work with, and you could carefully avoid topics you weren't interested in. But school is far from an ideal world. There's all this curriculum, for example, all these subject areas you're supposed to study whether you want to learn about them or not.

When it comes to research in specific subject areas like social studies and science, most kids find themselves at a disadvantage right from the start because they get stuck with unworkable topics. In 7th grade, my social studies teacher told each of us to pick a different country. Because we knew little about our subjects, and because our teacher's requirements were so broad (he required us to cover history, politics, economy, culture, geography, etc.), most of us copied or paraphrased information from encyclopedias. There really wasn't much else we could do given how little we knew about our topics and how much we were supposed to research about them.

So what will you do the next time you're asked to do a research project on something you don't know very much about or don't have much interest in? You'll have to get creative and try to find some meaningful connections between things you know from your own life and things your teachers want you to study.

Topic equations. The best research is always done by researchers who are passionate about their topics. This passion typically comes from a strong personal connection between the researcher and the topic being researched. I like to think of that connection in terms of a mathematical equation: Area of Interest + Area of Study = Possible Research Topic.

The first thing to do is make lists of things in which you have an interest. The lists I use most often with students are: "Things I Like", "Things I Do For Fun", "Things I Care About", and "Things I'm Interested In". You can make up your own lists if you like, but these work well for me.

Once you have your lists, the trick is to find connections between certain items and the subject area you are studying. For example, if one of the things I like is the TV show *Star Trek*, and we're studying 20th Century U.S. History, then doing research on the space program might be perfect for me. If we're studying ancient Egypt, however, I might not be able to make such an easy connection with that topic, so I'll have to think about it in a different way or pick another item on my list and try to make a different connection.

Picking research topics in traditional school subject areas using the topic equation approach is not easy. It takes some time, some thought, some creativity, and even a little luck. But the effort is worthwhile. When you have a topic that is appropriately defined and connected to something you understand and care about, you have more fun, your learning increases, and you do better work.

Start with What You Know and Love

LIKE
Things I Like

FUN
Things I Do For Fun

CARE
Things I Care About

INTEREST
Things I'm Interested In

Connect it to the Curriculum

INTEREST

SUBJECT

TOPICS

(Things from your list)

(What you are studying)

(Possible areas for research)

<i>(Things from your list)</i>	<i>(What you are studying)</i>	<i>(Possible areas for research)</i>

Example

<p style="text-align: center;">LIKE Things I Like</p> <p>Money Rap music Clothes Pizza Vide games Movies</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">FUN Things I Do For Fun</p> <p>Play baseball Take trips Go to the mall Hang out with friends Surf the internet Talk on the phone</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">CARE Things I Care About</p> <p>My family My pets My friends Violence in my community People being treated fairly</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">INTEREST Things I'm Interested In</p> <p>Getting a part-time job Computers Cars Going to college</p>

Example

INTEREST

SUBJECT

TOPICS

(Things from your list)	(What you are studying)	(Possible areas for research)
Baseball	The Civil War	Sports during the period; Baseball as a popular pastime; Etc.
Money	The Civil War	Standard of living; Purchasing power of the average family; Types of coin and paper money; Taxes; Etc.
Part-Time Job	The Civil War	Work opportunities for young people; Wages and availability of work; Slavery as an impact on employment in undeclared border states; etc.
Family	The Civil War	Family structure and relationships; North-South cultural norms; Roles and expectations; Etc.
Rap Music	The Civil War	Popular music of the period; Politically and socially critical songs and poems; Etc.
Community Violence	The Civil War	Relative safety of urban areas; Crime rates; Police work; Etc.