

Chapter Five

The Working Thesis Exercise

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This chapter is about finding something to write about in the first place. As I suggested earlier in the introduction and in Chapter 1, “Thinking Critically About Research,” the process of finding something to write about is complicated. In many ways, you need to think critically about the idea of research, you need to go to the library or the internet and conduct research, and you need to formulate a question or thesis to research all at the same time.

Sometimes, the subject of your research is called a “research question” or “problem statement.” I’ve decided to call this process “the working thesis” exercise to emphasize the idea that embarking on a research writing project involves making “a point” that is also a continually revised “work” in progress. A working thesis is tentative in that it will inevitably change as you go through the process of writing and researching. But if you’re more comfortable thinking of the starting point of your research project as being about asking the right questions or finding the right problem, that’s okay too.

Working With Assigned Topics

Many times, starting an academic writing assignment is easy: you write about the topic as assigned by the instructor. Of course, it is never a good idea to simply repeat what the instructor says about a particular topic. But in many college classes, the topic of your writing projects will be determined by the subject matter of the class and the directions of the instructor. If you are required to write a research paper for your political science class that focuses on the effects of nationalism, chances are an essay on the relaxation benefits of trout fishing would not be welcomed.



So, how do you write about topics assigned by the instructor? The answer to this question depends on the specific assignment and the class, but here are a few questions you should ask yourself and your instructor as you begin to write:

- ***What is the purpose and who is the audience for the essay you are being asked to write?*** In other words, what do you understand to be the instructor's and your goals in writing? Is the instructor's assignment designed to test your understanding and comprehension of class lectures, discussions, and readings? Is the instructor asking you to reflect and argue about some aspect of the class activities? Is the intended audience for the essay only the instructor, or is the assignment more broadly directed to other students or to a "general reader"?
- ***What do you think about the topic?*** What's your opinion about the topic assigned by the instructor? If it is a topic that asks you to pick a particular "side," what side are you on? And along these lines: to what extent would it be appropriate for you to incorporate your own feelings and opinions about the topic into your writing?
- ***How much "room" is there within the assigned topic for more specialized focuses?*** Most assigned topics which at first appear limiting actually allow for a great deal of flexibility. For example, you might think that an assigned topic about the "fuel economy and SUVs" would have little room for a variety of approaches. But the many books and articles about fuel efficient vehicles suggest the topic is actually much larger than it might at first appear.
- ***Does the assignment ask students to do additional research, or does it ask students to focus on the readings assigned in class?*** Assignments that ask students to do additional library and Internet research are potentially much broader than assignments that ask students to focus on class readings.

Coming up with your own idea

At other times, instructors allow students to pick a topic for their research-based writing projects. However, rarely do instructors allow their students to write research-based essays on *anything* for a lot of good reasons. For example, your composition and rhetoric course might be structured around a particular theme that you are exploring with your other reading assignments, your discussions, and your writing. Other ideas and topics don't really lend themselves to academic research writing. You probably have a special person in your life worth writing about (a parent, a grandparent, a boyfriend or girlfriend, etc.), but it is usually difficult to write a research-based essay on such a person. Some potential topics are too divisive or complex to write about in a



relatively short academic research-based essay, or some are topics that have become so overly-discussed that they have become clichés.

Besides the general theme of the course and other potential limitations to ideas for research, you also need to carefully consider your *own* interests in the ideas you are thinking about researching.

If you are allowed to choose your own research project topic, *be sure to chose carefully, especially if it is a topic you will be working with throughout the term.* Don't pick a topic simply because it is the first idea that comes to mind or because you imagine it will be "easy" to research. Focus instead on an idea that meets the goals of the assignment, is researchable, and, most importantly, is a topic that you are interested in learning more about.

Taking the time to develop a good research topic *at the beginning* of the research writing process is critical. Planning ahead can be difficult and time-consuming, and it can be tempting to seize on the first idea that seems "easy." But all too often, these "easy" first ideas end up being time-consuming and difficult projects. In other words, the time you spend turning your research idea into a topic and then a working thesis will pay off when it comes time to actually write the research project assignment.

Exercise 5.1

- **What are some ideas that would NOT make good research projects for this class? Working in small groups, try to come up with a list of items that you all agree would be difficult (if not impossible) to write a research project about for this class.**
- **Are there items that you can add to your list of topics that would NOT make good research projects, ones that are "researchable" but that seem too cliched or controversial to do effectively in one semester?**

Brainstorming for Ideas

Whether you are assigned a particular topic or are allowed to choose your own topic within certain guidelines, the next step is to explore the ideas that you might write about in more detail. This process is called "brainstorming," though some instructors and textbooks might refer to similar techniques as "invention" or "pre-writing." Regardless of what it's called, the goal is the same: to lay the foundation for focusing in on a particular topic and the working thesis of a research-writing project.

I recommend you keep three general concepts in mind when trying any approach to brainstorming with your writing:



- **Not all of these approaches to brainstorming will work equally well for everyone or work equally well for all topics.** Your results will vary and that's okay. If one of these techniques doesn't work for you, try another and see how that goes.
- **When trying any of these techniques, you can't censor yourself.** Allow yourself the freedom to brainstorm about some things that you think are bad or even silly ideas. Getting out the "bad" or "silly" ideas has a way of allowing the good ideas to come through. Besides, you might be surprised about how some topics that initially seem bad or silly turn out to actually be good with a little brainstorming.
- **Even if you know what topic you want to write about, brainstorm.** Even if you know you want to write about a particular topic, you should try to consider some other topics in brainstorming because you never know what other things you could have written about if you don't consider the possibilities. Besides, you still should do some brainstorming to shape your idea into a topic and then focus it into a working thesis.

Freewriting

One of the most common and effective brainstorming techniques for writing classes, freewriting, is also easy to master. All you do is write about anything that comes into your head without stopping for a short time—five minutes or so. The key part of this activity though is **you cannot stop for any reason!** Even if you don't know what to write about, write "I don't know what to write about" until something else comes to mind. And don't worry—something else usually does come to mind.

Looping or Targeted Freewriting

Looping is similar to freewriting in that you write without stopping, but the difference is you are trying to be more focused in your writing. You can use a more specific topic to "loop" back to if you would like, or, if you do the more open-ended freewriting first, you can do a more targeted freewriting about one of the things you found to be a potentially workable idea. For example, you might freewrite with something general and abstract in mind, perhaps the question "what would make a good idea for a research project?" For a more targeted freewriting exercise, you would consider a more specific questions, such as "How could I explore and write about the research idea I have on computer crime?"

Group Idea Bouncing

One of the best ways we all get different ideas is to talk with others. The same is true for finding a topic for research: sometimes, "bouncing" ideas off of each other in small groups is a great place to start, and it can be a lot of fun.

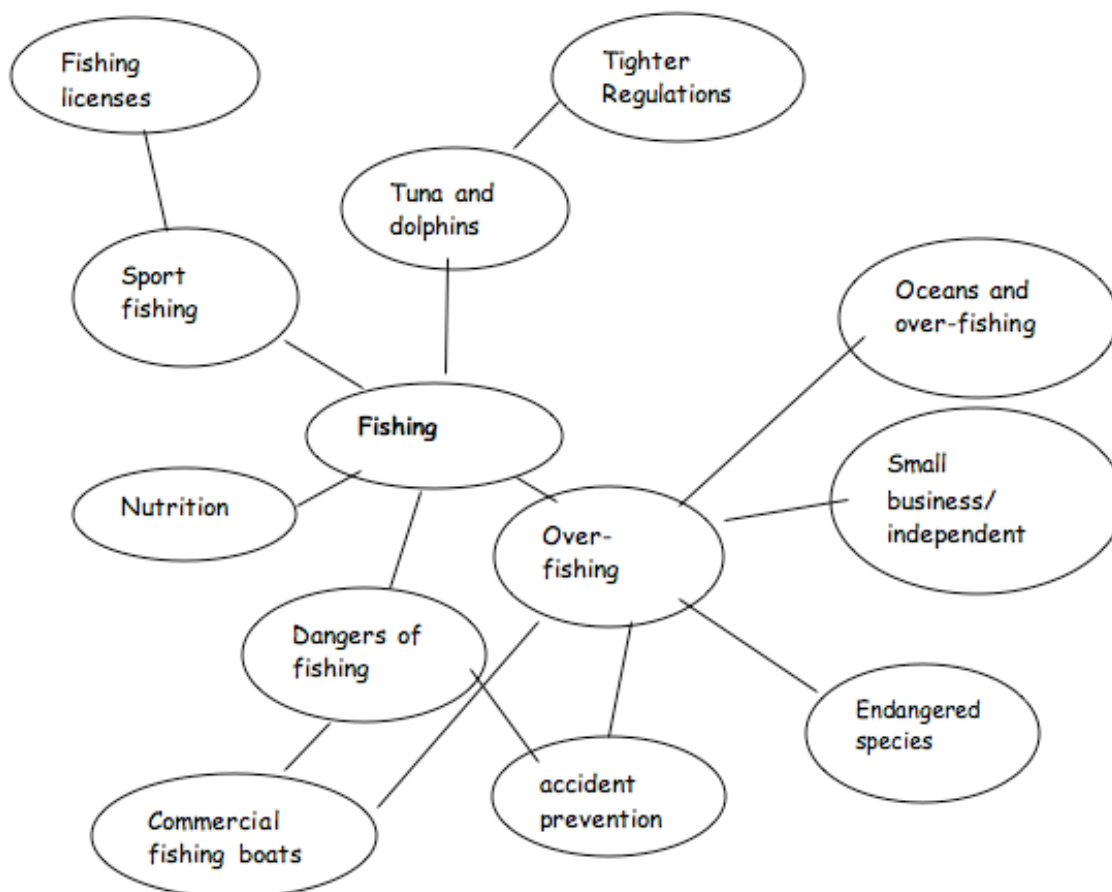
Here's one way to do it: name someone in a small group as the recorder. Each person in turn should give an idea for a potential topic, and the recorder should write it down.



Every person should take a turn quickly "bouncing" an idea out for the others—no "I don't know" or "come back to me!" Remember: no ideas are bad or silly or stupid at this point, so do not censor yourself or your group members.

Clustering

Clustering is a visual technique that can often help people see several different angles on their ideas. It can be an especially effective way to explore the details of a topic idea you develop with freewriting or looping. On a blank sheet of paper, write a one or two word description of your idea in the middle and circle it. Around that circle, write down one or two word descriptions of different aspects or characteristics of your main idea. Draw circles around those terms and then connect them to the main idea. Keep building outward, making "clusters" of the main idea as you go. Eventually, you should get a grouping of clusters that looks something like the illustration below.



Journalist Questions

One of the key elements of journalistic style is that journalists answer the basic questions of "What?" "Who?" "Where?" "When?" "How?" and "Why?" These are all good questions to consider in brainstorming for your idea, though clearly, these



questions are not always equally applicable to all ideas. Here are some examples of the sort of journalistic questions you might want to ask yourself about your idea:

- What is my idea? What are the key terms of my idea?
- Who are the people involved in my idea? Who is performing the action of my topic? Who are the people affected by my idea?
- Where does my idea take place? Where did it come from? Is it restricted to a particular time and place?
- When did my idea happen? How does it relate to the other events that might have taken place at a similar time? Are there events that happened before or after my idea that might have effected it?
- How did my idea happen, or how is it still happening?
- Why did my idea happen, or why is it still happening?

Brainstorming with Computers

Computers are a great tool for fostering these and other collaborative brainstorming techniques. For example, group idea bouncing can be used effectively with Internet "chat rooms," with instant messaging software, or with local area network discussion tools.

You can also collaborate on your brainstorming activities with computers with little more than simple word processing or email; Here are three variations on a similar theme:

- **Email exchange:** This exercise is conducted as an exchange over email. Each person in a small group does a looping/targeted freewriting to discover ideas for things she is interested in doing more research about. Then, each person in the group can post his looping/targeted freewriting to all of the other members of the group simultaneously. Email also allows for members of the group to collaborate with each other while not being in the same place--after all, email messages can be sent over great distances--and not at the same time.
- **"Musical computers:"** This approach is similar to the previous two exercises, but instead of exchanging diskettes or email messages, members of a group of students exchange computer stations in a computer lab. Here's how it works: a group (up to an entire class of students) does a looping/targeted freewriting at a computer station for a set period of time. When time is up, everyone needs to find a different computer in the fashion of the children's game "musical chairs." Once at the new computer station, the new writer comments on the original freewriting exercise. The process can be repeated several times until everyone has had a chance to provide feedback on four or five different original freewritings.



Exercise 5.2

- By yourself, work with at least two of the brainstorming techniques described above or other brainstorming techniques described by your instructor.
- Working with others in a small group, work with at least two of the brainstorming techniques described above or other brainstorming techniques described by your instructor. For example, have all the members of the small group each complete their own freewriting or clustering activity on the topic of her choice. Then, compare results. How do each of you react to different exercises? Are some techniques more useful for some?

Moving From Ideas to Topics With the Help of the Library and the World Wide Web

Coming up with an idea, especially using these brainstorming techniques, is not that hard to do. After all, we are surrounded by potential ideas and things that could be researched: teen violence, computer crime, high-fat diets, drugs, copyright laws, Las Vegas, dangerous toys. But it can be a little more tricky to figure out how ideas can be more specific and researchable topics. Ideas are general, broad, and fairly easy for all of us to grasp. Topics, on the other hand, are more specific, narrow, and in need of research. For example:

"Idea"

"Topics"

Computer Crime

Terrorism and the 'net, credit card fraud, computer stalking, "helpful" hackers

High-fat diets

Health risks, obesity, cholesterol, heart disease, health benefits of, weight loss from

Pharmaceutical Drugs

Cost of prescriptions, medical advances, advertising, disease prevention

In other words, a topic is a step further in the process of coming up with a researchable project for academic writing.

Chances are, your brainstorming activities have already helped you in the process of developing your idea into a topic. But before you move onto the next step of developing a working thesis, you should consider two more helpful topic developing techniques: a quick library subject search and a Web engine search.



A quick library subject search is just what it sounds like: using the computerized catalog system for your library, you can get a sense about the sort of ways other researchers have already divided up your idea into different topics.

☛ **Hyperlink:** For guidelines and tips for using your library's computer system to conduct subject searches, see Chapter Two, "Understanding and Using the Library and the Internet for Research" and the section called "Finding Research in the Library: An Overview."

For example, imagine your brainstorming has led you to the general idea "fisheries" and the potential problem of over-fishing in some part of the world. While this seems like it might be a potentially good and interesting thing to write about and to research, "fisheries" is an idea that could be narrowed down. If you conduct a subject search on your library's book catalog for "fisheries," you might find the library keeps track of different books in several categories. Some examples of these categories include:

- Fisheries, Atlantic Ocean.
- Fisheries, Canada.
- Fisheries, Environmental Aspects.

You might also want to use your library's periodical databases for some quick keyword searches. For example, a keyword search for "computer crime" in a periodical database returns article titles like "Demands for coverage increase as cyber-terrorism risk is realized" and "Making sense of cyber-exposures" (which are both articles about the concern businesses and insurance companies have about cyber crime), and also articles like "Meet the Hackers," an insider's view of computer hacking that disputes it being a "crime." At this point in the research process, you don't need to look up and read the sources you find, though you will probably want to keep track of them in case you end up needing them later for your research project.

Another great place to go to brainstorm ideas into topics is one of the many search engines on the World Wide Web, and you are probably already familiar with these services such as Google, Yahoo!, or alltheweb.com.

☛ **Hyperlink:** For guidelines and tips for working with Web-based research, see the section "Finding Research on the Internet" in Chapter Two, "Understanding and Using the Library and the Internet for Research."

Like a quick library keyword search, doing a quick keyword search on the Web can give you some good direction about how to turn your idea into a topic. However, keep these issues in mind when conducting your Web searches:

- Search engine searches are done by computer programs, which means that they will not sort out for you what is "relevant" from what is "irrelevant" for your search.



- Most search engines and search directories offer an "advanced search" option that explains how to do a "smarter" search. Read these instructions and you will be on your way to better searches.
- Different search engines index and collect information in different ways. Therefore, you should do keyword searches with the same phrase with a few different search engines. You might be surprised how your results will differ.
- If you aren't having much luck with the keywords of your general idea, try a couple of synonyms. For example, with "computer crime," you might want to try "Internet crime," or a related term such as "computer hacking."

Exercise 5.3

With an idea in mind, try doing a quick keyword search on the library's computer system and on a World Wide Web Search Engine.

- What sort of differences are there in the information you get back from doing a quick keyword search at the library versus doing one on the Web?
- If you are having a hard time getting results with your searches, can you come up with any synonyms for your key words?

Writing a Working Thesis

The next step, developing a "working thesis," can be a difficult and time-consuming process. However, as was the case when considering different ideas for research in the first place, spending the time now on devising a good working thesis will pay off later.

For our purposes here (and for most college classes), a **thesis advocates a specific and debatable issue**. In academic writing (including the writing done by your professors), the thesis is often stated fairly directly in the first third or so of the writing, though not usually at the end of the first paragraph where students are often told to place it. The sentence or two that seems to encapsulate the issue of the essay is called a "thesis statement."

Frequently, theses are implied—that is, while the piece of writing clearly has a point that the reader understands, there may not be a specific sentence or two that can easily be identified as the "thesis statement." For example, theses are often implied in newspapers and magazines, along with a lot of the writing that appears on Web pages.

The point is a thesis is a point.

Theses are not statements of facts, simple questions, or summaries of events. They are positions that you as the writer take on and "defend" with evidence, logic, observations, and the other tools of discourse. Most kinds of writing—and particularly academic writing—have a thesis, directly stated or implied. Even most of the writing we largely think of as "informational" has a directly stated or implied thesis.



Theses also tend to lend a certain organization to written arguments since what you include (or exclude) in a written text is largely controlled by the thesis. The main goal of the thesis (either as a specific statement or as an implied statement) is to answer two key questions that are concerns of all readers: "what's your point?" and "why should I care?"

Now, a **working thesis** is more or less a *temporary* thesis you devise in the beginning of the research process in order to set some direction in your research. However, as I wrote in the beginning of this chapter, you should remember:

Your working thesis is temporary and should change as you research, write, and learn more about your topic.

Think of the working thesis as the scaffolding and bracing put up around buildings when they are under construction: these structures are not designed to forever be a part of the building. Just the opposite. But you couldn't build the building in the first place if you didn't have the scaffolding and bracing that you inevitably have to tear away from the finished building.

Here's another way of thinking of it: while the journey of 1000 miles begins with just one step (so the saying goes), you still have to pick some kind of direction in the beginning. That's the purpose of a working thesis. You might change your mind about the direction of your research as you progress through the process, but you've got to start somewhere.

What does a working thesis look like? Before considering some potentially "good" examples of working theses, read through these **BAD** examples of statements, ones that **ARE NOT** theses, at least for the purposes of academic writing:

- Computer crime is bad.
- Fisheries around the world are important.
- *The Great Gatsby* is an American novel.

None of these sentences would make effective theses because each of these is more or less a statement of fact. Of course, we could debate some of the details here. But practically speaking, most people would assume and believe these statements to be true. Because of that, these statements don't have much potential as working theses.

These statements **ARE NOT** really theses either:

- There are many controversial ways of dealing with computer crime.
- There are many things that could be done to preserve fisheries around the world.
- *The Great Gatsby* is a wonderful novel for several different reasons.



These revised working thesis statements are better than the previous examples, but they are not quite working theses yet. The problem with these possible working theses is that they are hopelessly vague and give no idea to the reader where the essay is going. Also, while these statements are a bit more debatable than the previous group of examples, they are still statements that most people would more or less accept as facts.

While this next group of statements is yet another step closer, these statements **ARE NOT** really good working theses either:

- This essay will be about the role computer hackers play in computer crime committed on the Internet.
- This essay will discuss some of the measures the international community should take in order to preserve fisheries around the world.
- My essay is about the relevance today of *The Great Gatsby's* depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream.

Each of these statements is close to being a working thesis because each is about an idea that has been focused into a specific topic. However, these statements are not quite working thesis statements because they don't offer a position or opinion that will be defended in some way. To turn these topics into working theses, the writer needs to take a side on the issues suggested in the statements.

Now, these revised statements **ARE** examples of possible working theses:

- While some computer hackers are harmless, most of them commit serious computer crimes and represent a serious Internet security problem.
- The international community should enact strict conservation measures to preserve fisheries and save endangered fish species around the world.
- *The Great Gatsby's* depiction of the connection between material goods and the American dream is still relevant today.

If you compare these possible working theses with the statements at the beginning of this section, you will hopefully see the differences between the "bad" and "good" working theses, and hopefully you can see the characteristics of a viable working thesis.

Each of the "good" working thesis statements:

- takes a stand that is generally not considered a "fact;"
- is specific enough to give the writer and potential reader some idea as to the direction the writing will take; and
- offers an initial position on the topic that takes a stand.

Another useful characteristic of a good working thesis is that it can help you as writer to determine what your essay will **NOT** be about. For example, the phrasing of the



working thesis on computer hackers suggests to both the reader and the researcher that the essay will NOT be about the failure of "dot com" business, computer literacy, or computer software. Certainly these issues are *related* to the issue of computer hackers and computer crime, but these other issues will not become the *focus* of the essay.

Exercise 5.4

- Working with the topic you've chosen, create a working thesis similar to the above examples. Try to ensure that your working thesis is focused and to the point by keeping it to only one sentence. Creating a working thesis can be tricky, so be sure to devote some time to try out different possible working thesis statements. And don't forget: a working thesis is the temporary scaffolding that will help you build your essay. It will and should change in the process of writing, so it doesn't need to be "perfect" at this stage.
- After you have individually formed working theses, get together with a small group of classmates to share and revise them.



Assignment: Writing a Working Thesis Essay

The process of writing a working thesis essay can take many forms. Sometimes, topic proposals are formal essays written according to fairly strict guidelines and offering exhaustive detail. At other times, your writing about your topic might be more personal and brief in form. Here is an example of a working thesis essay assignment:

Write a brief narrative essay where you discuss the topic you have decided to research and write about. Tell your audience, your fellow classmates and your instructor how you arrived at this topic, some of the other ideas you considered in your brainstorming activities, and the working thesis you have settled on for the start of your project. Also, be sure to let us know about some of the initial library research you have conducted.

Questions to consider as you write your first draft

- Is the research topic one assigned by the instructor? Is it focused on a specific group of texts, questions, or ideas that have to do with a specific class?
- Are you expected to come up with your own idea for research? Since it is unlikely you will be able to write about just anything, what are some of the guidelines given to you by your instructor for what you can and can't write about?
- What are some of the ideas for research that you rejected as possibilities? Why did you reject some of these ideas?
- What ideas did you decide to brainstorm about? **Remember!** Be sure to brainstorm about more than one idea! What brainstorming techniques did you use to explore these ideas? Which ones seemed to work the best?
- What are some of the research topics that make up your research idea? In other words, when you begin to narrow your idea into different topics, what are some of the different research topics that interest you?
- What results did you get from a quick library keyword search? Be sure the keyword search you do of your library's databases examines books, periodicals, and newspapers to see a full range of possibilities for research. Also, be sure to consider as many synonyms as possible for the keyword terms you are using for your research topic.
- What results did you get from a keyword search on the World Wide Web? Be sure to conduct a keyword search using more than one search engine since



different services compile their data in different ways. Also, as was also the case with your library keyword search, be sure to consider as many synonyms as possible.

- Given these steps in the process, what is your working thesis? What variations of your working thesis did you consider along the way?

Review and Revision

As you will read again and again in this book, the first draft is only the beginning, the “raw materials” you create in order to really *write* your essay. That’s because the most important step in the process of writing is showing your work to others—your instructor, your classmates, readers you trust, your friends, and so forth—and making changes based on your impressions of their feedback.

☛ **Hyperlink:** For guidelines and tips for working with your classmates in peer review sessions, see chapter four “How To Collaborate and Write With Others,” particularly the section “Peer Review as Collaboration.”

When you have a first draft complete and you are ready to show it to readers, ask them to think about these sorts of questions as they give you feedback on your writing:

- Is the topic of the topic proposal essay clear and reasonable to your readers?
- What’s the working thesis? What sort of suggestions does your reader have to make the working thesis clearer? Is it clear to your readers that your working thesis is about a debatable position? Who might disagree with the your position? What do you think are some of the arguments against your position?
- What do your readers think is your main goal as a writer in pursuing this research project? Do your readers think you have made your purposes in writing this topic proposal and research project clear?
- Do your readers understand what library and Internet research you have already done on your topic? Are there particular examples of the library and Internet-based research that your readers think seem particularly useful or important?

Be careful to not limit your ideas for change to the things that are “easy” to fix (spelling, incomplete sentences, awkward phrases, and so forth). If you begin your process of revision by considering the questions suggested here (and similar questions you, your classmates, other readers, and your instructor might have), many of these “easy fix” problems will be fixed along the way. So as you go through the process of revision, think about it as a chance to really “re-see” and “re-imagine” what the whole writing project could look like.



A Student Example: "Preventing Drunk Driving by Enforcement" by Daniel Marvins

The assignment that was the basis for this essay asked students to write a "first person narrative" about the research project they would be working on for the semester. "It was really important to me think about a lot of different ideas and topics because I was worried that I might not be able to find enough research or stick with it," Marvins said. "This project helped me think this through."

Preventing Drunk Driving by Enforcement

Despite the fact that Americans are more aware of the problems of drunk driving than we were in the past, it is still a serious problem in the U.S. While educating everyone about the dangers of drunk driving is certainly important, I am interested in researching and writing about different ways to more strictly enforce drunk driving laws.

My working thesis for my research project is "While stronger enforcement measures to control drunk driving might be controversial and a violation of individual rights, they have to be enacted to stop drunk driving deaths." By "stronger enforcement measures," I mean things like police check points, lower legal levels of blood-alcohol, required breatholizer tests, less control on police searching cars, and stronger jail sentences.

I got the idea to focus on this topic by working on some of the different brainstorming techniques we talked about in class. I tried several different brainstorming techniques including freewriting and clustering. For me, the most useful technique was making a list of ideas and then talking it over with the other students in my group.

We all agreed that drunk driving would be a good topic, but I thought about writing about other topics too. For example, I think it would also be interesting to write about gun control laws, especially how they might effect deaths with kids and guns. I also thought it might be interesting to do research on the tobacco business and the lawsuits different states are conducting against them.

But I am more interested in exploring issues about drunk driving for a couple of different reasons. First, I think drunk driving is an



issue that a lot of people can relate to because most people know that it is dangerous and it is a bad idea. For example, we hear and read messages about not driving drunk in a lot of different advertisements. Still, even though everyone knows it is a bad idea, there are still a lot of deaths and injuries that result from drunk driving.

Second, I'm interested in doing research on stronger enforcement of drunk driving laws because I am not sure I have made my own mind up about it. Like everyone else, I of course think drunk driving is bad and police and society should do everything they can do to prevent people from driving drunk. On the other hand, I also think it's bad for police to pull over everyone they think might be drunk even when they don't know for sure. Strong enforcement might stop a lot of drunk driving, but it also gives police more chances to violate individual liberties and rights.

I have done a little bit of research already and I don't think I'm going to have any problem finding evidence to support my topic. Drunk driving seems to be a pretty common topic with a lot of different things written about it. I did a quick search of the library's databases and the World Wide Web and I found thousands of different articles. I skimmed the titles and it seemed like a lot of them would be very relevant and useful for my subject.

Drunk driving is a serious problem and everyone agrees that we should do something about it. The question is what should "it" be? My hope is that through my research, I will learn more about how stronger enforcement of drunk driving laws can curtail drunk driving, and I hope to be able to convince my readers of this, too.

