

The Topic of Choice when the Choice is Topic

Dearest Student,

I know how hard it is. It seems so daunting sitting there staring you in the face. Often times in today's academic rhetorical situation, we are asked to write about a topic of our own choosing. Sometimes this means choosing from a list provided by the instructor; in other instances, we are forced to create an argument based upon any topic our creative minds can come up with. While choosing a topic may seem like an easy task due to the almost limitless interactive scenarios in this world, I have seen, over the course of my tutoring history, students, like ourselves, again and again befuddled by what to write about.

While there may be many explanations as to why this extrinsically easy choice is so inherently difficult, the process of writing has been initiated and whether we like it or not, we must finish our task in order to receive a grade albeit a good or bad one. Thus and so linearly, we reach the idea of prewriting. We have been tasked with writing, we have decided it is required (even if it is not liked), and now we have moved onto the work itself. But here is where we must yank the rhetorical reigns if you will. While it may be suitable to simply write down about the first thing that comes to mind, often times, it is much easier and allows for a more logical writing sample if we "give meaning" to the topic and choose an "angle for communicating" the topic (Boiarsky 1982). Now what the crap does that mean? Why is writing more complicated than just pen to paper?

I'm sure you have most certainly seen students "who can write on command, ejaculating correct little essays without thought" as I know I have seen them (Murray 1978). While they may appear to be muses of the writing world, often times, these students have put so little time into their prewriting that they have failed to logically present their ideas or have simply not enjoyed and savored the activity of writing. You, as a student, have been given a powerful tool with which to cast unto this world your creative majesty. Unfortunately, we must refine your scope, as we cannot discuss *everything* that comes to mind. So what are some guidelines that we can use to choose and narrow a topic so that it will simply flow from air to paper? Well, I'm glad you have asked. Below is a simple list of signposts that I have constructed to guide our writing process to its definitive goal: a finished paper. While this list is quite impressive, it is not all inclusive. Make it a starting point, and if you see the need for more or less sign posts, then by all means, shovel away and create your own map.

SIGNPOSTS FOR CHOOSING A TOPIC:

1. Choose something in line with your academic interests (Useem 1997)
 - a. Undoubtedly, there will be those students who have no idea what they want to do with themselves in college. If this is the case for you, then simply choose something that you found interesting in a class or that is a potential major some day.
2. Write about past experiences and frames of reference (Boiarsky 1982)
 - a. We as humans are creatures of action (or perhaps inaction for the case of some of us) but we naturally remember either certain events that we saw or participated in. Write about some of the experiences that stand out or you remember the most details about.
3. Pick something around you and write/say as many things as you can about it (Morris 1968)

- a. For example, I look outside and I see it raining. I could write about the lack of rain the past few months and how it has affected the grub worm population. Or I can write about a poem by Robert Frost and nature. No idea is too outrageous or beyond the scope of writing. Do not limit yourself in this stage of prewriting.
4. Write about what you have the most data for.
 - a. Perhaps you went to the library and you found 5 articles on one topic but only 2 for another. By the simple fact that you can get more ideas out of 5 articles rather than 3, you can choose that topic.
 - b. BE CAREFUL! Just because you have 5 articles does not mean that they are different from each other or are soundly viable.
5. Choose a topic about which you strongly believe
 - a. Be it religion, knowledge, pursuit of happiness, what have you, it can be far less challenging or at least more enjoyable if we write about what we believe in. For example, one may write on the positive effects of restoring the ozone simply because they believe it will create a better world.
 - b. Often times, you are not the only one who believes this way. You may find that others have provided materials that support your beliefs. This provides more credibility and can ultimately enhance your writing.
6. Take a stand on a particular argument (Morris 1968)
 - a. Like above, you are not the only one who may hold a belief. Perhaps others may have presented it first and you wish to add to their argument. Take a stand on the topic and debate it. Duke it out baby!
7. Write because the situation calls for it
 - a. Perhaps you walk down the street and observe an old lady being mugged. (First off help the dang woman) then write about it for your local newspaper. Incite change where you see fit! There is no better stage for writing then when the mind yearns for action.

By looking back at this list I come to realize perhaps the most important aspect behind choosing a topic: observation. Observe your surroundings and take in as much detail as you can. Observe what guidelines your teacher has provided. It will only help you in the end. By seeing all of the different details, you have a much wider palette to choose from when it comes to a topic. Make it relevant and make it something that you want to write about. If it is a list of topics, choose the one that intrigues you the most (even if but a trickle of intrigue).

Now, the choosing of a topic undoubtedly brings up a new issue with your prewriting: understanding and narrowing your topic. As Fulwiler and Harakawa state in the Blair Handbook, "it's seldom a problem if your first draft is off the track, wanders a bit, and needs refocusing; however, it *is* a problem if, for your second draft, you don't know what to do about it" (Section 21). Unfortunately, this is a topic for another essay (great choice huh?). Until that time, my friend, write not only because you have to, but because you want to. Make this paper and the next something to enjoy and learn from. Writing has limitless bounds and possibilities; dive in and see what you find.

Sincerely,
Chuck Frye
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Works Cited

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