

Writing Spaces

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**Exploring Community and Personal Connection
as Idea Generation for Argumentative Writing**
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Exploring Community and Personal Connection as Idea Generation for Argumentative Writing

Amanda Rachelle Warren

Overview

The argumentative essay is a relied upon element of the composition classroom. These essay assignments help students develop thoughtful, well-considered arguments on debatable topics. As many teachers know, those “debatable topics” tend towards predictable subject matter that is often too broad for an essay-length argument, is often too simple or binary in its structure, or is simply an “easy answer” to the question “what do I write about?” When students make poor topic choices, those choices result in familiar, dispassionate arguments, rather than arguments students are invested in and passionate about.

Paul Roberts, in his 1958 essay from *Understanding English* entitled “How to Say Nothing in 500 Words,” suggests that when it comes to choosing essay topics, students often take the “usual” approach to their detriment. In the half-century since Roberts published his piece, students still seem to be struggling with topic selection. Students who choose common topics often do so for a variety of reasons: they believe the topic is broad and it will be easy to find sources, they believe the topic is the kind of thing that college students should write about and that instructors should want to read about, they may have already written on a similar topic at the high school level and are eager to reuse that material, etc. Argumentative essays about cheerleading as a sport, the harmful effects of smartphones, and gun control/rights have become expected topics, and although students may have personal connections to these topics, the arguments they produce are often dispassionate because they do not utilize their experience as a means of creating or supporting their argumentative stance.

Michelle D. Trim and Megan Lynne Issac, in their essay

“Reinventing Invention: Discovery and Investment in Writing” suggest that “the areas of invention that seem to challenge students the most” are related to the most basic aspects of invention in writing: brainstorming ideas and developing a workable topic (109). Trim and Issac suggest that first-year writing students in particular have little familiarity with topic generation and selection, and that offering students activities which help them practice invention is vitally important as way to help students identify “writing topics that both satisfy the writing situation and reflect [their] interest and investment” (110).

This 30–50-minute brainstorming assignment and large group discussion asks students to consider their connections to interesting, nuanced arguments that affect them and/or the communities they are a part of. In asking students to reflect on their hobbies and interests, identify groups they belong to, and complain about the things that bother them, students can identify possible argumentative topics beyond the obvious. Post-brainstorm session, the lists students create are part of a large group discussion focused on translating topics into strong, interesting, argumentative theses.

Requiring students to identify a personal/community connection to topics and positions as part of the idea generation/invention stage helps students establish personal interest in the arguments they make. Identifying a personal/community connection also helps students recognize the value of personal experience as evidence and means of establishing ethos, and to understand how to balance that experience with primary and secondary source material as support for an effective argument.

Time Commitment

30-50 minutes

Materials

Necessary for students: paper, writing instrument. Helpful for instructor: dry erase/chalk board and dry erase markers/chalk (for completing their own version of the activity on the board as the

students complete theirs), a timer or clock (for timing the activity).

Assignment or Activity Process

- First, have students get out a piece of paper and a writing instrument. Ask students to fold the piece of paper into thirds (short way [hamburger] or long way [hot dog]) to create divided sections on the paper. Assure students that it does not matter which way they fold their sheet of paper as the direction of paper folding will immediately (and inexplicably) become their primary concern for this activity.
- Next, ask students to label each divided section as follows: “Hobbies/Interests,” “Things that Bother Me,” and “Groups I Belong To.”
- The instructor should explain each of the categories.
 - Hobbies/Interests: any hobbies or interests the students have (for example: TikTok videos, any club activities, shopping, hair, sleeping in, cooking, music, etc.) Remind students that this category is broad as they tend not to consider casual interests as hobbies or interests. Provide some examples of informal interests related to your own daily activities, internet use, and entertainment to help them see this category in a broader sense.
 - Things that Bother Me: anything students are particularly bothered or annoyed by (for example, general education requirements, inconsiderate drivers, the price of textbooks, people who chew loudly, etc.) Ask students to think of arguments or frustrations that come up in their daily life. Remind students that the things that annoy them do not have to be huge and earth shattering. Provide some

examples of small “bothers” in your own life that can help them see this category in a broader sense.

- Groups I Belong To: any groups, formal or informal, that students may belong to (for example, first generation college student, eldest child, student government, Asian-American, cheerleader, Marvel fan, Appalachian). Ask students to think of not only formal groups but identity groups, cultures, and co-cultures. Provide some examples of groups you belong to help them see this category in a broader sense.
- Ask students to spend 10 minutes creating a list under each of the headings. Optional: Instructor may choose to create their own lists on the dry erase/chalkboard as the students complete their lists.
- Once student lists are complete, return to large group for discussion.
 - Ask students for an example of an item from their lists (starting with “Things that Bother Me” is a good way to get students talking as many of them will have strong opinions on items under this list and other students will join in to complain or argue against their views, allowing for a lot of interesting class discussion). Attempt to engage each student to allow for more variety of responses and diversity of voices. As students share their ideas ask them the following questions:
 - Why did you include this item under this heading? (Also ask if anyone else in the classroom listed this item.)
 - What are your thoughts on this topic? Or What interests you about this topic?

- Are there any arguments that you can think of related to this topic? (This question can be asked of the entire group as well).
- Do you think you could write a paper on this topic? If so, what would you argue? (This question can be asked of the entire group as well).
- Ask students to share an item from their lists that they believe it would be a terrible/impossible choice for an argumentative paper. As students present their “terrible/impossible” choices, work as a class to find a possible argumentative topic related to that item.
- Ask students to take one minute to look at their lists again and circle three items that they think would be most interesting as topics for an argumentative paper.
- Finally, ask students to take 10 minutes to work with the person sitting closest to them to come up with an argumentative thesis statement related to each of those items.
- If there is time, ask each student to share the thesis they think is strongest. If there are students who are still unsure, ask those students to share their two theses with the class so that the class can assist them with feedback.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Practice idea generation/invention through a structured brainstorming activity
- Consider rhetorical situation: purpose/message/audience
- Expand their understanding of argument to include

personal and community issues

- Demonstrate their understanding of the importance of a clear purpose (thesis) to arguments
- Demonstrate an appropriate awareness of audience (peers/academic audience)
- Consider/incorporate suggestions from peers and instructors
- Think critically about the arguments/problems/difficulties in their own lives and communities
- Consider how personal experience can serve as effective evidence and a means of establishing ethos in an argumentative paper

Learning Accommodations

- Time to complete activity stages can be expanded or reduced as needed.
- Students may choose to work with a classmate while creating their lists. Conversation and list-sharing is encouraged.
- Since materials from this activity are not collected, this activity may be completed synchronously in an online classroom using learning management system (LMS) chat or video/audio features.
- This activity can be completed asynchronously through a video demonstration by the instructor and a follow up activity through discussion board post or using quiz features.
 - Discussion Board Post: Ask students to 1) post their

lists as a discussion board post, 2) identify the top three items that they think would be most interesting as topics for an argumentative paper, and 3) briefly discuss their position on the three items. Require peers to comment on three of their classmates' posts and offer possible thesis statements for the original poster's potential paper.

- Quiz: Ask students to complete a quiz that 1) requires students to create lists in each category, 2) requires students to identify three possible topics, 3) asks students to create potential thesis statements for each of the topics. Note: this method does not allow for peer review or idea sharing.

Works Cited

Roberts, Paul. "How to Say Nothing in 500 Words." *Understanding English*, Harper & Brothers, 1958. *Defmacro*, www.defmacro.org/HowtoSayNothingin500Words.pdf.

Trim, Michelle D. and Megan Lynn Isaac. "Reinventing Invention: Discovery and Investment in Writing." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, vol. 1., edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemilansky. Parlor Press, 2010. Pp. 107- 125. *Writing Spaces*, https://writingspaces.org/?page_id=234.

Further Reading

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Lessner, Steven and Collin Craig. "Finding Your Way In: Invention as Inquiry Based Learning in First Year Writing." *Writing Spaces: Readings on Writing*, vol. 1., edited by Charles Lowe and Pavel Zemilansky. Parlor Press, 2010. Pp. 126-

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