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Developing Fruitful Research Questions
Emily Spitler-Lawson

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Overview

When I was a younger, less experienced writing instructor, I told a classroom full of first year composition students, "Write about whatever you want!" when introducing a major research-based assignment. As you can probably imagine, I very quickly learned that some student-generated topics and questions were more suited to the kind of academic research the prompt (and the course outline) required than others. Despite the chaos that ensued that semester, my instincts, I think, were good. I wanted students to have agency. I knew I was about to ask them to spend considerable time and energy navigating databases, reading difficult scholarly sources, drafting, and revising, and I wanted them to do all of this in service of a question they cared about because they had *chosen* it.

This assignment gives students considerable agency in choosing a question to explore for a high-stakes research project while at the same time setting boundaries meant to guide developing researchers to questions that are likely to lead to successful writing projects. Clear communication of instructor expectations, along with Catherine Savini's "Looking for Trouble," provide a framework for the question development process, and students are given ample opportunity to develop, discuss, and reflect on possible research questions with their instructor and classmates.

This assignment also suggests a way for instructors to provide quick, actionable feedback on student-generated research questions, and for students who need additional guidance to get it before they invest significant amounts of time in a question that will not serve them well.

In addition to guiding students as they develop a research question,

this assignment invites them to think of themselves as academic writers participating in an ongoing conversation about their topic. Ideally, developing their question helps them to understand the *kinds* of questions academics tend to ask, and why they ask them, and encourages students to channel their curiosity about a text in productive, academically "fruitful" directions.

Time Commitment

2-3 Weeks, or 3-4 class meetings (assuming class meets twice a week), depending on how much time is available for question development at each meeting and how soon students need to start researching

Materials

Students will read and discuss "Looking for Trouble" by Catherine Savini from Volume 2 of *Writing Spaces.*

This assignment assumes that students have previously read most or all of an anchor text. **A good anchor text for this assignment will encourage students to ask questions about topics that are appropriate for the research project the instructor has designed.** I have had success with letting students choose a memoir from a list I provide that is related to a class theme, but an anchor text might also be a campus common read, a novel, or an instructor-curated collection of essays and articles. It is important that the students read and discuss at least a significant portion of the anchor text with classmates and the instructor before developing their research questions.

Optionally, students also read and discuss "What is 'Academic' Writing?" by L. Lennie Irvin from Volume 1 of *Writing Spaces.*

Assignment Process

This assignment is flexible. You know what types of questions are

most likely to be successful for the high stakes research projects you assign. The question development process simply gives you a platform to share those insights with your students, and for them to share their process as they follow their curiosity and develop a research question that will set them up for success.

- First, the instructor assigns "Looking for Trouble" as a class reading when students have read most or all of the anchor text. A class discussion of this piece might pay special attention to Savini's "Looking for Trouble in Four Steps" section (57-59) and to the example question development process shared in the article on pages 59-63.
- Optionally, students also read Irvin's "What is 'Academic' Writing?" in preparation for this first class discussion in order to have additional context regarding the characteristics and expectations of academic texts.
- After discussing "Looking for Trouble" (and "What is 'Academic' Writing," if the instructor chooses to use it) as a class, the instructor informs students that: 1.) They will be using Savini's advice in "Looking for Trouble" to develop a "fruitful" question that will form the basis for their research project. 2.) The question should grow out of an event or issue present in the anchor text. 3.) The instructor will be evaluating all research questions and assigning an evaluation of "yes," "yes, but let it develop," "not yet," or "no" based on the potential "fruitfulness" of the question. Make sure that students are aware that if they develop a question that gets a "not yet" or a "no," they will get additional support to help them get to "yes."
- When introducing the question development assignment, the instructor provides additional advice specific to their individual research project, and, if possible, examples of past successful and unsuccessful student research questions. Students are encouraged to notice the characteristics of both types of questions, and the instructor may share the kinds of

improvements "not yet" and "no" example questions needed, and what kind of development "yes, but let it develop" questions underwent.

- Optionally, students are given a significant amount of class time to discuss potential topics and research questions with peers who have also read their anchor text. Students may also be encouraged to tentatively explore potential questions together using library resources if time and availability of technology permits. This allows students to get a sense of the feasibility and scope of potential questions. The instructor checks in on group discussions and provides immediate feedback and assistance with library resources.

- Students write a low-stakes Research Question Development assignment of 500-750 words with sufficient time to complete the assignment thoroughly and thoughtfully. Students get credit for completing the assignment, regardless of the instructor's yes / yes but let it develop/ not yet/ no evaluation. In the Research Question Development assignment, students are required to include the following paragraphs and quote and cite both Savini and their anchor text:

  - **First paragraph:** Details exactly what the student wants to find out about the topic or issue from the reading. They might need several sentences to put their question into words. Students are encouraged to look back at the example questions from past students.

  - **Second paragraph:** Details how the student developed their question. What part (or parts) of the memoir (or other anchor text) inspired them to ask it? How did they narrow down their question to the one they are asking now? Students are encouraged to quote the memoir (or other anchor text) in this paragraph.

  - **Third paragraph:** Answers the questions of: "Who

are the stakeholders? Who needs to know or might be affected by the answer to this question? What are the stakes of the student's research?" Students can be directed to p. 64 of Savini for additional help constructing this paragraph.

- o **Fourth paragraph:** Explains why the student thinks this question is going to be academically "fruitful," as Catherine Savini calls it in "Looking for Trouble." And asks them to reflect on how and if they used Savini's advice in their own question development process. Students also explain what they need to find out next in order to become more informed about their question and what kinds of sources they might turn to for reliable answers that are appropriate to the research project.

- Instructors evaluate these assignments, giving feedback to all students, with special attention paid to those whose work earned a "no" and "not yet." These students are assured that they have earned credit for doing the assignment, and are also given feedback about how to improve their questions and earn a "yes."

- The instructor keeps in contact with students who earned a "not yet" and "no" in class, over email, through the LMS, or in whatever way is appropriate for the modality of the class to remind them of resources available to them as they revise their questions.

- Students begin to find, evaluate, and read potential sources for their research-based assignments. If appropriate, students who earned a "not yet" or "no" are strongly encouraged to apply instructor feedback and use this initial period of research to learn more about their topic so they can revise their questions.

- "Not yet" and "no" questions are revised and shared in writing with the instructor. (Note: It is not necessary for students to revise the entire 500-word assignment.

Improving the question is usually sufficient.) "Yes" and "Yes, but let it develop" questions **may** be adjusted as students develop more nuanced perspectives on their topics, but this is not required.

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity/assignment will:

- Gain an understanding of the types of questions academic researchers might ask about their topic

- Channel curiosity about an issue raised by an anchor text to develop a fruitful, academically useful question to guide their research

Learning Accommodations

- Annotating the readings as a class using a group annotation tool or asking students to annotate individually and share annotations in class can encourage useful initial discussions of "Looking for Trouble."

- If computer or internet access is an issue, the research question development assignment could be completed as an in-class writing prompt of between 40-50 minutes after students have had a break between class meetings to consider and develop their questions.

- If you have access to librarian-run workshops about campus resources available to student researchers, scheduling one during the period when students are working on their question development assignment can be extremely helpful.

- Communicate with students who need to improve their questions in multiple ways, if possible. For example, an LMS comment, an email with all "not yet" and "no" students

Bcc'd, and an in-class announcement that "not yet" and "no" questions have received feedback will encourage more students to revise than if just one of these methods of contact was used.

- Keep a spreadsheet with student names in one column and questions in another, and color-code the response each question earned. This allows the instructor to keep track of who still needs extra support and guidance. As students improve and revise their questions, replace the old question with the new one the student shared with you in writing and change their color in the spreadsheet.

- As students begin to research and struggle with scholarly articles, it may be helpful to assign Rosenberg's "Reading Games" from *Writing Spaces* Volume 2.

Works Cited

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