RESEARCH TOPIC PROPOSAL

For this assignment, you must choose a topic for your research paper. Please remember that your topic must be approved before you can start your paper. It should be something you want to write on and something you can maintain interest in over the course the writing process. For this assignment, you need to do the following:

1. **Read the Forbidden and Discouraged Topics list:** If your topic is forbidden it will not be approved; if it’s on the discouraged list, you will have a greater challenge to make it different enough to demonstrate more critical thinking, depth, etc.

2. **Read the assignment guidelines for the Research Paper:** This will give you a sense of how to focus your topic choice.

3. **Come up with a starting point/topic idea:** Be sure you have chosen something that is narrow and focused, an appropriate writing topic as opposed to an area of inquiry. For instance, smoking as a topic is too general and doesn’t ultimately present an argument. A paper that addresses why children smoke is much more focused. Saying that children smoke because of peer pressure is even more focused. You need a topic which will fit into the scope of the research paper. It should be a topic you think you can find interesting throughout the semester. It may help to initially phrase this as a question for yourself.

4. **Ask questions and explore the topic:** While you shouldn’t be doing formal research just yet, it may help to explore possibilities online and in the databases to see what materials are out there and what questions people are already asking about the idea you have. Find your own questions about the topic that you want to answer or feel need to be answered.

5. **Answer the questions below for the assignment.**

**Assignment:**

For the actual assignment, you need to submit a **250-500 word proposal** that answers the following questions:

1. **What is your proposed topic?** This should be the basic, overall topic that you are exploring. It may end up a little broader at first, but the next two questions require more focus. We will use the example of “Curbing Teenage Smoking” as our topic. From the topic, it appears like it will ultimately be a problem (teenage smoking) and solution (how to curb it) topic.

2. **Why you are interested in this topic?** These can be as simple or as complex as you like. Don’t just say that you like the topic. Tell why you like it. What is it about the topic that fascinates you? More importantly, your reasons should make you consider how your audience will receive the topic. Your interest in the subject is crucial, but you will have to consider whether or not those reasons will make it interesting for someone else.
3. **What do you already know about the topic?** This list should give you ideas on possible thesis statements. By examining what you already know, you might see that you already have some definite opinions on the subject. What are your reasons for defending your position for each essay?

4. **What do you need to know/don’t know about the topic?** This list works just like the previous one. What you don’t know could lead you into an inquiry into new aspects of your topic you hadn’t considered. How will you find this information?

5. **What is your research question?** Please note: the first sentence here should be a QUESTION. For example, you might want to look at the potential causes of teenage smoking (because you cannot solve a problem if you do not know what causes it). You should create a research question to provide more focus - e.g. “What causes teens to smoke?” (though that’s a bit broad). It might try to specifically point out a single cause as the main one or it could use evidence to show that various causes all contribute to this issue. You could try to show that there clearly is a widespread problem with this (though note that “teenage” needs to be more defined - 13-15 year olds may have different issues than 16-17 year olds, and 18-19 year olds, while still teenagers, are also legal adults who can make the decision on their own).

6. **What is the intended GOAL/PURPOSE?** Your goal needs to be somewhat realistic, though there are always factors, which may hinder the success of your argument. In our example from #5 above, we need to figure out why we want to examine the causes of teen smoking. Are we trying to make a connection between teenage smoking and a cause that hasn’t really been explored or accepted? Or is our ultimate goal to help those teens change their behaviors? If so, are we doing so directly with those teens, or are we looking at ways to change behaviors through third parties and other programs?

7. **Who is the INTENDED AUDIENCE?** For this, you will need to identify a specific audience to address. Your audience should not be in full agreement with you - otherwise, how is your topic debatable? Depending on the specific purpose we have, the audience will change. If we are looking at causes related to the home lives of the teens, our initial audience might be parents (who can affect those home lives). Parents could then examine their own interactions with their children at home and learn from this essay. However, we could also consider social workers as a possible audience - they might want to understand why these teens are smoking in the first place in order to help them quit. The essay couldn’t address both audiences though - the information provided and how the points are supported would be radically different. In either case, the audience would still need to be more specific for the paper eventually. Please note that we are most likely NOT going to consider the teens as the audience - a research paper simply is not the ideal method to persuade teenagers to believe something or do something.

8. **Why is this important?** If there is nothing important about the topic (to the intended audience, at least), then why write about it? You need to explore your reasons for choosing this topic. Teenage smoking, for instance, is linked to a variety of health concerns, social concerns, and educational concerns. As we explore the idea, we may discover that while examining the causes is helpful, ultimately identifying those causes means little if we don’t attempt to do something about them, which shifts our purpose from a cause/effect essay to a problem/solution one - in this case, a more active choice and something easier to demonstrate as important.
9. **Fill in the blanks:** Use the following sentence to help get a sense of purpose, audience, and focus for the essay - “I want to persuade <intended audience> to/off/that <goal/purpose/desired outcome> because <reasons/why it’s important>.” If you have completed the sections above, this statement should be fairly easy. It may also help show you how your chosen purpose doesn’t work for your audience, or how the reasons don’t really demonstrate importance.

10. **Debatability:** Discuss briefly how this is debatable. If your audience agrees with your stance and is willing to fulfill your goal, then there is likely to be no debatability for the topic’s purpose or audience (and thus one of those elements would need to change). In our example above, it’s quite possible that the expected causes aren’t really debatable (nor are the general effects of smoking debatable - most people accept that smoking leads to various types of cancer, etc); the debate is really about what we can do about the problem - each solution has its own issues and own opposition.

Be as thorough in your answers as possible. That way you might discover things that you had not considered, and there will be fewer questions about your choice that you have not already answered. Without this assignment completed in some fashion, you will be unable to go any further on your research paper. Your topic **MUST** be approved by your instructor. If your topic is not approved, you will need to resubmit this assignment with a different topic proposal. You may also schedule an appointment to discuss your options.

Topic changes will be considered on a case by case basis. Changes in focus do not necessarily need approval (switching from teenage smoking being caused by peer pressure to the need for programs to prevent teenage smoking is acceptable without my approval; a switch to how to prevent underage drinking, however, would require an entirely new proposal). Any changes in the main topic should ideally take place before the first draft is due.

**Finding Focus:**
Effective topics/research questions should be **NARROW, INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGING, and GROUNDED IN EVIDENCE.**

**Narrow:** Avoid overly broad or strictly informative types of topics. These are best addressed in book-length works, not short research papers for a class.

**Intellectually challenging:** Topics should provoke thought, not just regurgitate information. This is key to making your topics interesting. Controversial topics tend to be weak in this area - they don’t make us think, they make us react on an emotional level.

**Grounded in evidence:** The most effective research topics are ones where facts can be used to support the stance. Thus, philosophical, ethical, and religious questions make for less effective research topics because they are typically based on beliefs and opinions, rather than facts.

*(adapted from Diana Hacker’s A Writer’s Reference)*