

# *Writing Spaces*

## Assignments & Activities Archive

### Source Speed Dating: Where Do Research Topics Come From?

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## Source Speed Dating: Where Do Research Topics Come From?

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### Overview

The beginning of a research paper assignment might involve a discussion of the goals of the assignment and a short brainstorming activity to help students think about possible topics. When students are asked to quickly choose a topic in this manner, without first conducting preliminary research, they are led to believe that research topics come from prior knowledge and isolated interests rather than from context-specific questions. Positioning research in this way can inadvertently overlook or misconstrue the ways in which reading and questioning serve as the basis of academic inquiries. As Patrick Sullivan explains, “In many cases, there is no process of inquiry required or modeled for students at all. Students are simply asked to state and support a position” (60). Without first exploring potential conversations, or “listen[ing] for a while” as Kenneth Burke describes in his parlor metaphor (110), students are unaware of the types of questions scholars are asking or how those questions are being explored and discussed. As a result, students often pursue the first idea that comes to mind, yielding topics that are trite, unfocused, or uninteresting. Thus, the goal of this activity is to move students away from the notion that research is used to confirm prior beliefs toward a view of research as an inquiry process.

Because of course-related time constraints, students usually do not have the luxury of authentic inquiry as it occurs for us as scholars—through reading and engaging with academic conversations. However, by exposing students to potential conversations prior to asking them to select a topic, we can help them use reading and research to develop curiosities and questions. This activity introduces students to a variety of conversations that can occur within an

overarching research topic, which reveals to students that scholars are studying the topic from a range of fields and perspectives, asking different types of questions, and using various methods to investigate those questions. While this activity was designed for an assignment that has an umbrella topic, it can also be used for open-ended research projects by selecting an even wider range of sources. This activity begins with a discussion about the process of inquiry-based research before engaging students in a round of source “speed dating” with the purpose of revealing new ideas, prompting questions, and demonstrating that “writing and questioning are inseparable” (Miller and Jurecic vi).

### Time Commitment

One 75-minute class session, or adapted to fit available time

### Materials

2-3 sources more than the number of students: printed journal articles, copies of book chapters, and books. Optional paper for notes. This activity can also be done digitally by uploading scanned texts, digital copies, and/or links into a shareable folder.

Optional: Assigned reading in preparation for or following the activity that explains the role of inquiry in academic research such as an excerpt of Appendix A: “Researching and Writing about Creativity” by Barbara Rockenbach and Aaron Ritzenberg from Ryan Van Cleave’s *Creativity* (399-419).

### Activity Process

- Students will engage in a discussion about research using generative questions about prior research experiences: In the past, how have you chosen topics to research? What kind of guidance have you been given during topic selection? Once you have a topic, where do you begin your research? What do

you consider when finding and selecting sources? (How) Do you browse for and skim sources prior to deciding which sources to use?

- After discussing students' prior experiences, the instructor can briefly share the ways in which premature topic selection limits research possibilities and describe how scholars arrive at new topics and ideas through reading and engaging with ongoing academic conversations. (See chapters 2 and 7 in Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs' textbook *Writing about Writing* to learn about reading as conversational inquiry (30-51) and John Swales's concept of discourse communities (558-71)). If using an assigned pre-reading about inquiry-based research, this part of the discussion might also include questions about the text.
- Next, ask students to clear their desk spaces, place the sources around the classroom, and invite students to walk around the room, reading the title of each source.
- Then, invite students to choose one source to browse for about 5 minutes. For the first source, it may be helpful to provide brief directions about how to skim or browse a text (as opposed to reading it from the beginning). As the time concludes, prompt students to write down the title and author(s) along with any notes, ideas, or questions.
- Students move around the room, repeating the browsing and note-taking process with as many sources as time allows. Ideally, students visit at least 5 sources.
- Before concluding the activity, ask students to walk around the room one more time, writing down the titles of any sources they were interested in but did not browse. Optional: Ask students to save a photo of their notes for ease of reference and/or to upload the photo to the LMS for class

credit.

- Finally, lead a debrief conversation about the experience. Ask students to share particular sources and ideas that stood out to them, especially any perspectives or questions that were new or surprising. Also discuss the concept of listening to conversations before choosing one to enter, the ways in which this approach lends itself to inquiry and allows for genuine questions as opposed to searching for predetermined answers, and how students might use a similar approach as they begin independent research before the next class session. If assigned reading about inquiry-based research will be assigned following the activity, direct students' attention toward relevant aspects of the text.

## Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this activity will:

- Gain an understanding of inquiry-based research and the research process
- Learn about academic conversations
- Engage with sources as part of invention/topic selection
- Think critically about research topics and questions

## Learning Accommodations

- Time can be expanded or reduced for any part of the activity. Students can also be invited to stay with sources longer as needed.
- I find the physical sources and paper for notes limit distractions, but the modality can easily be shifted to a combination of physical and digital sources, solely digital

sources, and/or digital note-taking to accommodate students' needs or for online/asynchronous courses.

- The physical movement of students can be accommodated by passing the sources and having students remain seated or by switching to a digital modality.

## Works Cited

- Burke, Kenneth. *Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*. Louisiana State UP, 1941.
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- Rockenbach, Barbara, and Aaron Ritzenberg. "Researching and Writing about Creativity." *Creativity: A Reader for Writers*, edited by Ryan G. Van Cleave, Oxford UP, 2016, pp. 399-429.
- Sullivan, Patrick. *A New Writing Classroom: Listening, Motivation, and Habits of Mind*. Colorado UP, 2014.
- Wardle, Elizabeth, and Doug Downs, editors. *Writing about Writing*. 5th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2023.

## Further Reading

- Ballenger, Bruce, et al., editors. *The Curious Writer*. 6th ed., Pearson, 2022.
- Warren, Amanda Rachelle. "Exploring Community and Personal Connection as Idea Generation for Argumentative Writing." *Writing Spaces: Assignments and Activities Archive*, Writing Spaces, 2022, [writingspaces.org/exploring-community-and-personal-connection-as-idea-generation-for-argumentative-writing/](https://writingspaces.org/exploring-community-and-personal-connection-as-idea-generation-for-argumentative-writing/).