

## Developing Research Questions

Developing a good research question is critical. Without one, students can end up picking a question that is too broad to be properly researched or does not allow for debate between perspectives. Good research questions:

- ▶ Require a judgment or evaluation to be made (not just description); ←
- ▶ Are researchable (it is possible to find relevant and credible sources); ○
- ▶ Involve genuine points of ongoing debate; ○
- ▶ Invite engagement with alternative perspectives; and ○
- ▶ Are simple and do not contain multiple, nested questions. ←

When it comes time for students to choose a research question, you may wish to have them follow these steps:

1. Choose a topic of interest. This topic should have a clear focus that will guide your research.
2. Start developing a list of questions about the conversation you have decided to join. When developing your list, think about what you want to accomplish with your research. Your research questions should begin with words such as *what, why, when, where, who, how, would, could, and should*.
3. Once you have a list of research questions, it is time to select which one will be the focus of your research. Choose a question that best meets your interest and purpose.
4. Finally, you will need to refine your research question. When writing research questions, revision is inevitable. You want to make sure your question is not vague or too broad. One good way to do this is to do a preliminary search for resources. If your preliminary research yields too many results, you should probably limit the scope of your study. However, if you receive too few results, you should broaden the scope of your question.

You can help students learn how to refine their questions by giving them examples of weak or vague questions to rewrite them into good research questions. First, you should begin by going through the research question selection process yourself.

### ⊕ Directions

Use the criteria for a good research question to evaluate the research questions that have been provided by your workshop leader.

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## Examining Your Question

Begin with **Your Question** but don't think of it as static. The question should evolve as your research progresses. In fact, it will likely change as you gather enough information to complete this worksheet.

Now consider the **Context and Significance** of your question. What is the context of your question? Why is it a question worth exploring? What importance does it have and to whom or what?

If this is a question worth exploring, other voices are offering **Genuine Points of Ongoing Debate**. Remember that those voices don't have to contradict each other; they should make claims and offer evidence in support of those claims. What are some of those claims and how do they relate to each other? How will they help you answer **Your Question**?

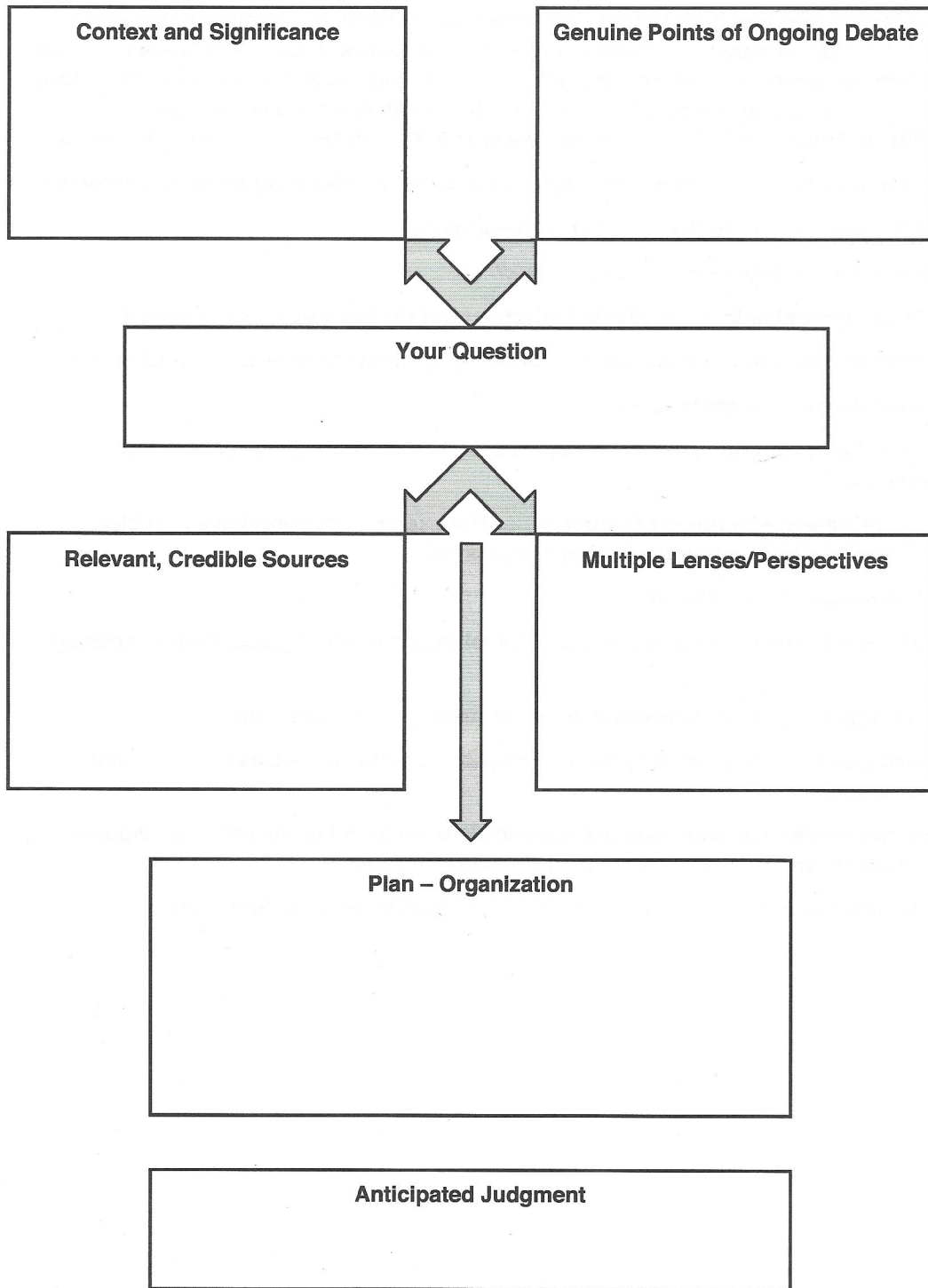
You have probably already determined that not all the voices you've found are really relevant to your question and those should be kept in your research log but they don't belong here. The **Relevant, Credible Sources** you list and justify here need to be explicitly linked to your question and be worthy of your using them.

Whether you consider your question through **Multiple Lenses or Perspectives**, you must find different ways to analyze, or break down, your question. The voices of the **Ongoing Debate** might be a starting point but you must differentiate between them and specify the **Lenses or Perspectives** through which you will work to answer **Your Question**.

Like **Your Question**, your Plan – Organization might change but the sooner you have a **Plan** to answer **Your Question**, the more likely you are to do so. Your **Organization** should make your line of reasoning clear. How should the parts fit to come to a logical conclusion or judgment?

The conclusion or judgment to which you finally come may or may not be the same as this original **Anticipated Judgment** but you need to hear yourself answer **Your Question**. Is any research actually required to **Anticipate a Judgment**? If not, you've got the wrong question. This **Anticipated Judgment** will be tested and you should return to it often as you research to see how your original thinking has been impacted by your research.

## Examining Your Question



## Finding Texts and Sources

AP Seminar requires both teacher and student to search for resources that can be used not only as stimulus material, but also as evidence in their arguments. As the AP Seminar instructor, becoming proficient at finding texts that you can use within your units is very important. Likewise, students will need to become similarly skillful at finding texts that they can use within the context of their assessments.

You should ask yourself the following questions when choosing stimulus materials:

- ▶ Will this material serve the intention of the lesson?
- ▶ Will this material make my students think?
- ▶ Will this material help my students to understand the issues or perspectives?
- ▶ Will this material raise further questions for my students to investigate and reflect on?
- ▶ To what degree is it creditable and citable?
- ▶ Do I need to do anything with this material to make it more useful/accessible/interesting?
- ▶ Have I represented a range of source types (for example, peer-reviewed articles, speeches, works of art) with varying complexity?
- ▶ Do I have texts from different lenses?

In addition to the previous questions, the following is some guidance on choosing sources:

- ▶ Select topics that lend themselves to an interdisciplinary approach.
- ▶ Newspaper reports generally give an account of events, as well as evidence and explanation.
- ▶ Passages containing argument are more likely to be found in the editorial pages of newspapers and journals than among the reporting pages.

Write down some of the specific sources you go to in order to find texts.

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## Potential Source Websites

For the Team Project, students are able to select their topic and move toward creating a debatable question to research and subsequently answer. Similarly, for the Individual Research Project and Presentation, students will select a topic based on the stimulus material provided by the College Board, formulate a research question, and research the topic in an effort to answer their question. When a team or student selects an area of interest in any wide-ranging subject matter, from "Genetically Modified Food," to "Freedom of Expression" or "Artificial Intelligence" as a general topic, the likelihood is that many of the things they will run across in an initial search on the Internet will be sources that are not consistently credible.

- ▶ By beginning on one of the following sites, they will find information that comes from generally reliable sources.
- ▶ Despite these sources offering research materials that have been "vetted" in some ways, students will still need to practice the skill of source evaluation on their findings. These just help them get started.
- ▶ Additionally, they allow for more focused searching by the student, despite the possibility that their area of interest may not be in their instructor's area of expertise.

The following are potential academic databases or sites:

- ▶ Ebsco  
(free to Capstone classes; a link is available on the AP Seminar Teacher Community)
- ▶ ProQuest
- ▶ Gale
- ▶ Gale: Opposing Viewpoints in Context
- ▶ ProCon.org
- ▶ Google Scholar
- ▶ Worldcat.org
- ▶ Jstor
- ▶ ABC-CLIO issues database

This is not to say that these sites provide sources without bias, however, generally the sources students find here will be legitimate pieces to include in their argument, and will provide solid support once they have been analyzed, synthesized and evaluated.

For further information or instruction, teachers and/or students can access this resource:

**TILT- Texas Information Literacy Tutorial (from UT Austin) <http://library.utb.edu/tilt/nf/intro/internet.htm>**

## Strategies for Searching Online

To be able to search for information effectively, students will need to be taught how to be more strategic in their searches. The following sites can help guide students on how to be more precise in their searching.

[www.google.com/advanced\\_search](http://www.google.com/advanced_search) — provides annotations on how to use the Google Advanced search criteria

<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/2466433?hl=en&rd=1> — provides examples of punctuation, symbols, and operators to get more specific search results

[www.socialscience.uq.edu.au/documents/forms/infoskills\\_operators1.pdf](http://www.socialscience.uq.edu.au/documents/forms/infoskills_operators1.pdf) — provides a helpful overview of key ways searches can be modified to provide more specific results

## Creating an Annotated Bibliography

As students research their questions it is important that they keep track of the sources they have read, viewed, or experienced and how they can contribute to their overall argument. This is so they can build arguments based on evidence and have a record to refer to when they cite others' work.

One simple way to do this is through creating an annotated bibliography. An annotated bibliography is a list of sources, together with a very short description and evaluation for each source. An annotated bibliography entry could include:

- ▶ A citation in an appropriate style (e.g., APA, MLA);
- ▶ A brief summary of the text;
- ▶ Comment on the authority or credibility of the author;
- ▶ Comment on strengths and weaknesses of their argument;
- ▶ The author's point of view; and
- ▶ How the text relates to the student's question or thesis.

An example is provided below (using APA format).

**Salinsky, E., & Scott, W. (2003, July 11). Obesity in America: A growing threat. National Health Policy Forum Background Paper. Washington, D.C.: George Washington University.**

This 31-page background paper was written in 2003 by two research associates with the bipartisan National Health Policy Forum (NHPF) in order to influence government policy. Salinsky and Scott focus on the economic and health costs associated with obesity and health-related issues, not just for individuals struggling with weight problems but for the country as a whole. This paper has useful evidence to support my thesis about the consequences of inaction by the government. A family member gave me this book, which now seems to be out of print but is archived on the NHPF website, [www.nhpf.org/library/details.cfm/2421](http://www.nhpf.org/library/details.cfm/2421).

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