

Sample Fact/Idea List

The following fact/idea list could be used to develop ideas in response to a prompt from a Writing 140 section affiliated with Sociology 169: Changing Family Forms.

To what extent does the ongoing debate over same-sex marriage exhibit sincere and transparent reasoning?

| FACT | IDEA |
|--|--|
| 1. Prop 8 is also known as the California Marriage Protection Act. | 1. What does the term “protection” imply (e.g., that permitting homosexuals to marry will somehow endanger existing heterosexual marriages or perhaps the institution of marriage as a whole)? |
| 2. The yellow sign promoting Prop 8 read: YES ON 8. | 2a. Unlike blue or pink, yellow is a gender-neutral color. 2b. Were some voters confused by a counter-intuitive choice that could have been more transparent (i.e., voting “no” on the initiative meant voting “yes” on gay marriage, while voting “yes” on the initiative meant voting “no” on gay marriage)? |
| 3. Republican presidential nominee John McCain supported “the efforts of the people of California to recognize marriage as a unique institution between a man and a woman”; Democratic presidential nominee Barack Obama opposed “divisive and discriminatory efforts to amend the California Constitution.” | 3a. Prop 8 was used by both presidential candidates to curry favor with segments of the electorate. 3b. Could ulterior motives muddle the reasoning on this debate? |
| 4. Prop 8 passed in CA, partly because many Hispanic and African-American voters who lean left in most policy decisions voted “yes” on Prop 8. | 4a. The majority of voters opposed same-sex marriage. 4b. Is CA more conservative than advertised, particularly socially conservative? 4c. Party affiliation does not dictate voter behavior on certain issues. |
| 5. Prop 8 banned same-sex marriages in CA but not domestic partnerships. | 5a. Why didn’t Prop 8 address domestic partnerships? 5b. Is it sincere and transparent to focus solely on marriage without considering cohabitation? |
| 6. Passing of this proposition did not invalidate same-sex marriages performed before November 5, 2008. | 6a. This grandfather clause for preexisting marriages is similar to amnesty for naturalized illegal immigrants, suggesting that CA treats its minority populations in a consistent manner. 6b. Knowing the date on which their constitutional right to marry might be overturned, some homosexual couples may have married prematurely, increasing the risk of domestic problems and divorce. |

Topoi

The topics, or *topoi*, were an important feature of classical rhetoric, having the function of assisting the orator in discovering, or inventing, arguments and material. The common topics included such concepts as “Definition,” “Circumstance,” or “Relationship,” and these in turn had subcategories—“Definition,” for example, included the subtopics of “Genus” and “Division.” While the classical topics are still quite useful, particularly for argumentative discourse, the use of commonplaces for invention can also be approached with terminology that is somewhat more contemporary. What is needed, of course, is a set of terms (what Kenneth Burke calls a “terministic screen”) that can be applied fruitfully in a wide range of contexts to generate new perspectives and useful ideas. The terms provided in the sample below are by no means exhaustive, nor must they be used in this particular order. They do, however, illustrate how heuristic terms may be employed to suggest useful questions applicable to a variety of issues. Keep in mind that they also function well in lists and clusters.

| CAUSE & EFFECT | CONTRAST |
|---|--|
| <i>means/ends</i> <i>assumptions and antecedents</i> <i>implications and consequences</i> | <i>tension/opposition</i> <i>contradictions</i> <i>paradox</i> |

| CHANGE | VALUES |
|--|--|
| <i>evolutionary</i> <i>revolutionary</i> <i>growth/decay</i> | <i>ethical/moral</i> <i>practical</i> <i>social</i> <i>political</i> <i>spiritual/metaphysical</i> |

| FORM/STRUCTURE |
|---|
| <i>superficial vs. deep</i> <i>form vs. function</i> |

As is true of fact/idea lists, the topoi may provoke claims or questions or both. The following material demonstrates a two-step procedure whereby topical terms are first used to generate questions (Step 1), which are then converted into potential claims (Step 2).

Step 1: Generating Questions

The following exercise demonstrates how the topoi were used to generate topic-specific questions in response to a prompt used in a Writing 140 section affiliated with Sociology 150:

Does substance abuse represent a legitimate form of social deviance?

CAUSE AND EFFECT

Means/Ends: *Investigate the relationship of means to ends.*

- › Substance abuse is a means to what ends?
- › Which of these ends are deviant?

- › Which are not? Why? What is the difference?
- › Can “normal” people abuse substances?
- › Are there “normal” ways to engage in deviant acts?

Assumptions and Antecedents: *What necessarily precedes X? What does X assume?*

- › What usually or necessarily precedes substance abuse?
- › What does substance abuse presume? What does deviance assume?
- › To consider substance abuse as a deviant form of behavior, what does one have to assume?

Implications and Consequences: *What necessarily follows from X? What will be the consequence of X?*

- › What necessarily follows from substance abuse?
- › What will be the consequence of substance abuse?
- › What are the individual consequences of substance abuse?
- › What are the social consequences of substance abuse?
- › Is deviance a necessary consequence of substance abuse?

CHANGE

Evolutionary: *Are evolutionary changes involved in X?*

- › What kinds of changes or effects will substance abuse generate over time?
- › Is there a long-term process associated with the development of substance abuse?
- › Do definitions of substance abuse or deviant behavior develop over a prolonged span of time?
- › How does a social problem emerge?
- › Do members of different generations view substance abuse from necessarily different perspectives?
- › Are definitions of deviance static or do they change over time?

Revolutionary: *Are revolutionary changes involved in X?*

- › Are revolutionary changes involved in substance abuse?
- › What short-term issues or circumstances contribute to the onset of substance abuse?
- › How do new drugs or addictive substances become popular?
- › Is there a relationship between revolutionary change and the development of a social problem?

Growth/Decay: *Is X growing or decaying?*

- › Is substance abuse growing or decaying?
- › Is the problem of substance abuse one that is likely to become more serious in our society?

- › Are there signs that substance abuse is declining among members of a particular population or generation?
- › Does the characterization of substance abuse as a deviant type of behavior cause rates of drug use to increase or decline?

CONTRAST

Tension/Opposition: *What tensions or oppositions exist in X?*

- › What tensions or oppositions exist in substance abuse?
- › Who are the stakeholders involved in the problem of substance abuse?
- › What is at stake in the problem, and who are the victims?
- › Why do people feel so passionately about the topic of substance abuse?
- › What debates or arguments tend to arise out of discussion on the subject of deviance?

Contradictions: *Look for potential contradictions regarding the issue, especially if proposed by your opponents.*

- › What are the potential contradictions regarding the issue of substance abuse, especially if proposed by your opponents?
- › Is the classification of substance abuse as a deviant behavior fair?
- › Are there distinctions to be made between abuse of prescription substances and abuse of illicit substances?
- › Why/how do some perspectives on deviance seem contradictory?

Paradox: *Look for irresolvable contradictions within the issue.*

- › Are there irresolvable contradictions within the issue of substance abuse?
- › Who or what generates these contradictions and why? How?
- › Are these contradictions context specific?
- › Is there widespread disagreement over definitions of deviance? Where do contradictions within definitions seem to arise?

FORM/STRUCTURE

Superficial vs. Deep: *Examine the relationship between superficial appearance and deeper significance.*

- › What is the relationship between superficial appearance and deeper significance in substance abuse?
- › What differences can you detect in the issue between your first-glance or initial response and the ideas you develop upon further reflection?
- › What role, if any, do stereotypes or superficial assumptions about substance abuse play in the process of defining what constitutes deviant forms of this behavior?

Form vs. Function: *How does the form of X relate to its function?*

- › How does the form of substance abuse relate to its function?
- › Why is American culture conducive to substance abuse?
- › Are certain types or forms of addictive substances used or abused more often than others? On what factors does the difference depend?
- › How do definitions of deviance shift depending on the kind of substance involved?

VALUES

Consider the issue in terms of values such as the following:

Ethical/Moral

In what ways are definitions of deviance and perspectives on substance abuse determined or informed by our ethical/moral standards or accepted social norms?

Practical

What practical implications or consequences of substance abuse can you identify? Do some practical implications outweigh others in terms of their significance or applicability to the abuser? To his or her family? To society in general?

Social

Many argue that society ultimately bears the burden of substance abuse. How is society implicated in definitions of deviance? Which consequences of substance abuse do persons other than the abuser him/herself most often experience?

Political

How do notions of deviance and arguments regarding substance abuse play out in the political arena? Can you identify typical arguments about substance abuse that have been raised by members of political parties on different ends of the political spectrum?

Spiritual/Metaphysical

Can you identify spiritual and/or metaphysical consequences of substance abuse? What kinds of spiritually oriented programs have been developed to address the issue of substance abuse?

Step 2: Progressing from Questions to Potential Claims

Whereas Step 1 demonstrated the range of questions that might arise while applying the topoi to an issue, Step 2 proceeds to illustrate how argumentative claims can arise out of the use of the topoi:

| CAUSE AND EFFECT | |
|--|---|
| Means/Ends <i>Investigate the suitability of means to ends.</i> | Although moderate use of certain substances offers purported health benefits, the tendency for use to escalate into abuse poses a serious health risk. |
| Assumptions and Antecedents <i>What necessarily precedes X? What does X assume?</i> | The notion of social deviance assumes, perhaps erroneously, that the norms or mores of a given era are definitive and virtuous. |
| Implications and Consequences <i>What necessarily follows from X? What will be the consequence of X?</i> | Though deviance is often a consequence of substance abuse due to the lessening of inhibitions, substance abuse may pacify or even debilitate devious individuals in certain circumstances. |
| CHANGE | |
| Evolutionary <i>Are evolutionary changes involved in X?</i> | The definition of deviance evolves with each generation, leading to ambiguity as to what qualifies as substance abuse. |
| Revolutionary <i>Are revolutionary changes involved in X?</i> | New drugs become popular when glamorized by celebrities, causing the public to associate excess with success. |
| Growth/Decay <i>Is X growing or decaying?</i> | While abuse of illicit substances seems to be declining thanks in part to the persistent and concerted efforts of antidrug campaigns, abuse of less stigmatized yet more insidious substances (e.g., coffee and alcohol) seems to be on the rise. |
| CONTRAST | |
| Tension/Opposition <i>What tensions or oppositions exist in X?</i> | Discussions about substance abuse tend to be impassioned, especially in the context of intervention, because all parties involved may consider themselves the victim. |
| Contradictions <i>Look for potential contradictions regarding the issue, especially if proposed by your opponents.</i> | Though a distinction should be made between the abuse of prescription and illicit substances, when the former is sold on the black-market, it is rendered an illicit substance. |
| Paradox <i>Look for irresolvable contradictions within the issue.</i> | Addiction is often irresolvable, as those abusing substances may be unable or unwilling to engage in a lucid and logical conversation due to the very nature of addiction. |

| FORM/STRUCTURE | |
|--|--|
| <p>Superficial vs. Deep</p> <p><i>Examine the relationship between superficial appearance and deeper significance.</i></p> | <p>At first glance, substance abuse seems deviant only when perpetrated by one who commits a crime under the influence, yet further reflection suggests that a law-abiding citizen may be deviant in that their impaired job performance compromises their economic and societal contribution.</p> |
| <p>Form vs. Function</p> <p><i>How does the form of X relate to its function?</i></p> | <p>In certain cultures the abuse of synthetic substances is considered unhealthier and thus more egregious than the abuse of organic substances.</p> |
| VALUES | |
| <p><i>Consider the issue in terms of values such as the following:</i></p> <p>Ethical/Moral</p> <p>Practical</p> <p>Social Political</p> <p>Spiritual/Metaphysical</p> | <p>While rehabilitation programs and support groups for substance abuse have undeniable value, some individuals avoid joining them, despite guaranteed anonymity, for fear of identifying themselves as socially deviant.</p> |

The Pentad

The five terms of Kenneth Burke's Pentad resemble the journalistic "Five Ws" (who, what, when, where, why):

| | |
|---------------|---|
| act | names what took place, in thought or deed |
| agent | names the doer of the act, whether person, force, or concept |
| agency | names the manner or means of the act |
| scene | names the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred: spatiotemporal but also social, moral, psychological, etc. |
| motive | names the purpose of the action |

However, the Pentad represents a world view that is radically different from that implicit in the Five Ws. The latter heuristic presupposes a more materialistic or positivistic outlook, one that has come to be associated with the traditional journalistic commitment to describing "just the facts." The Pentad, on the other hand, sees events as *motivated*, as actions rather than motions. Because it privileges the importance of human motivation, the Pentad is particularly well suited to the analysis of human events or social issues. Furthermore, as Burke suggests in *A Grammar of Motives*, the five simple terms of the Pentad permit a complexity of analysis offered by few other heuristics:

Our term, agent, for instance, is a general heading that might, in a given case, require further subdivision, as an agent might have his act modified (hence partly motivated) by allies (co-agents) or enemies (counter-agents). Again, under agent, one could place any personal properties that are assigned a motivational value, such as "fear," "malice," "the will," "intuition," or "responsibility." A TSA officer might treat the body as a property of the agent (an expression of disposition, indicating harmlessness or hostility), whereas a full-body X-ray machine would treat it as scenic (a purely objective material). Airline passengers are obviously sentient beings who have deliberately chosen to travel (that is, agents), yet in their accumulation they constitute a social scene, with its own peculiar set of motivational properties.

War may be treated as an agency, insofar as it is a means to an end; as a collective act, subdivisible into many individual acts; as a motive, in schemes proclaiming a cult of war. For the man inducted into the army, war is a scene, a situation that motivates the nature of training; and in mythologies war is an agent, or perhaps a super-agent, in the figure of the war god.

Sample Brainstorming List Using Pentad

The following brainstorming list was used to develop ideas in response to a prompt used in a Writing 140 section affiliated with Political Science 130:

Is the use of racial profiling an appropriate way to protect national security in a time of terrorist threat to the United States?

| ACTS (THAT INVOLVE REFERENCE TO RACIAL PROFILING) | | |
|---|--|--|
| News conferences regarding terrorist activities | Immigration debates or border dispute | Airport security checks |
| Discussions or media coverage of war efforts abroad | Legal actions/court findings | Wearing of particular clothing that identifies one as part of a suspect ethnic group |
| AGENTS (THE PEOPLE, FORCES, OR CONCEPTS THAT PROMPT REFERENCE TO RACIAL PROFILING) | | |
| Police | News commentators | Immigrants |
| Xenophobia | Civil rights groups (counter) | Politicians |
| Nativists | Scholars/researchers | Attorneys |
| Activists (counter) | Refugees | Nationalism |
| AGENCIES (MEANS BY WHICH DISCUSSION OR REPRESENTATION OF RACIAL PROFILING IS INVOKED) | | |
| Newspapers and magazines | Television shows | Airport security checks |
| Political discourse | Civil rights litigation | Surveillance systems (e.g., facial recognition) |
| SCENE (SITUATIONS IN WHICH RACIAL PROFILING IS OFTEN INVOKED) | | |
| Times of terrorist threats to "homeland" security | Anniversary of 9/11 | Immigration disputes |
| Moments of national fear and anxiety | Media reports/coverage | Airport security checks |
| Traffic violations | Television (e.g., <i>America's Most Wanted</i>) | Movies (portrayals of "typical" criminals or terrorists) |
| MOTIVE (WHY RACIAL PROFILING IS INVOKED) | | |
| To reinforce social norms | To promote awareness of one's environment | To discuss current manifestations of racial/ethnic prejudice |
| To prevent future terrorist attacks | To codify categories of difference | To blame social problems on the Other |

A single concept can often be ascribed to multiple terms, illustrating the versatility and complexity offered by this heuristic.

For example, one might begin with an AGENT or AGENCY, and discuss MOTIVE, e.g.:

What motive might law enforcement officers have to invoke the notion of racial profiling?

This process may lead to another question:

But isn't law enforcement itself a kind of agency? If so, who are the agents? Are officers the only law enforcement agents, or would the media also be included? How about government officials? Does it depend on the circumstances?

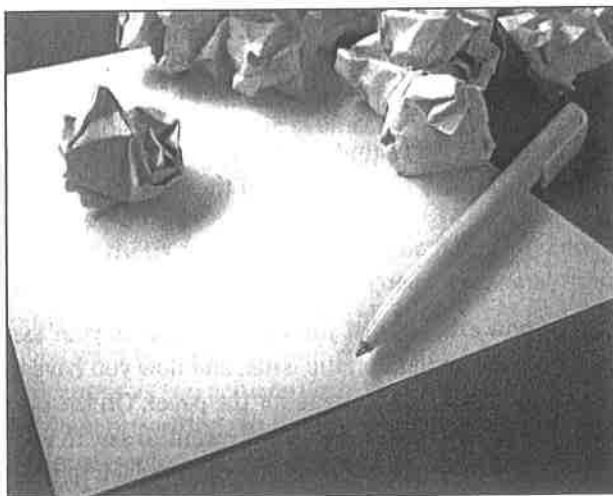
This process demands an examination of SCENE, so that a clearer picture of the ACTS can emerge, e.g.:

What motive would law enforcement officers have to invoke the notion of racial profiling in the act of discussing national security? How might the motive change when these agents are talking about immigration? What is the role of scene or circumstance in determining motive?

By juxtaposing different ACTS, AGENCIES, MOTIVES, and AGENTS, you begin to develop a complex view of an issue that might not otherwise develop out of heuristics that overlook the issue of agency. This development of ideas is not linear, but rather recursive—much like the writing process itself.

Points-to-Make Lists

Invention is perhaps the most creative phase of the writing process, and the most crucial: your paper will only be as strong as the fundamental concepts and insights that go into it, and the function of invention is to probe beyond the obvious responses to a question or issue in order to explore ideas that are less certain but more interesting. It follows that invention not only can be but *should* be a messy and somewhat unpredictable process. When invention is going well, you will be generating far more material than you could possibly use in a single paper, and, in fact, you will *not* want to use *most* of what you come up with during your invention activities. While this may seem inefficient, wasteful, or even profligate, it's actually both logical and necessary. When ideas spring to mind, they don't come pre-sorted with labels attached—"mediocre," "good," "excellent." Finding an excellent idea or argument is rather like selecting a perfect apple: you have to compare it against many others, choosing the one that seems best and setting aside those that don't seem as good. If you want the best apples or the best ideas, you will usually have to sort through a large pile to find them.



A **points-to-make list** helps in that process. During invention, always remain alert for “paragraph points,” claims or ideas that have the potential to form the basis for a paragraph you may later want to include in your paper. Whenever such an idea occurs to you, record it on your points-to-make list in a brief phrase or sentence, taking the time to articulate your idea in a manner that will remain comprehensible. (An expression such as “fluorocarbons and comfort” may make sense at the moment, but you should probably record something closer to “our cultural predisposition to comfort contributes directly to the environmental crisis.”)

You are unlikely to use all of the claims and ideas you save on your points-to-make list, but the structure of your eventual text will largely reflect the quality of the ideas recorded thereon. The points-to-make list forms the perfect place to begin a rough plan or outline, and, as will be explained in the next section, is also a good place to look for a thesis to use in your paper.

Preparing a Points-to-Make List

Step One

Before you begin your points-to-make list, go back and reread the writing task for the assignment. In any writing situation, you need to compare your prewriting ideas to the actual writing tasks at hand, since it's very easy to drift away from the issue you originally set out to explore.

Step Two

Next, review your invention materials carefully. It might be useful to do this with a highlighter or different-colored pen so that you can clearly mark the ideas that you think might be effective in your essay. At this stage, don't worry if you're interested in a number of different (and possibly unrelated) ideas. In fact, be as inclusive as you can—just develop a primary list of points (ideas and/or opinions you have about the topic) and evidence (facts, examples, and quotes) that you like for your essay.

Step Three

As you review your invention materials, you will begin to think of points you would like to make in your paper; record these on the list in whatever order they come to you. (You can rearrange their order when you construct your rough plan.) Your list should probably include many different kinds of ideas. On some lines, you will be making very broad points, while on others you'll have examples and small pieces of evidence. In addition, some ideas will be more opinionated while others will be explanatory. Don't worry, and don't try to jump to a thesis statement too soon. Sometimes you need to work with ideas for a while before you finally arrive at what you “really want to say.” Be especially aware of the trap that many students fall into—a *mere list of points is not a thesis statement*.

As you record points, you will also begin to note connections and relationships between the points that you wish to make. Try to keep track of these so you can use them in setting up your rough plan.

Step Four

At this point, you may know exactly what you want to argue in your essay. Perhaps from the beginning, you've had a clear opinion on the issue, and now you have numerous supporting points that might get worked into a structure for the paper. On the other hand, perhaps the list has not moved you any closer to what you really want to say. In either case, consider the following questions as a way to focus and narrow your approach to the paper:

1. **Significance:** Why does this question matter? Of course, it matters because it's a class assignment. However, in order to write an effective essay, you need to work out *for yourself* what's at stake in the response that you provide to the writing task. Why should people care about the issue? What do you propose to teach or explain to your audience?
2. **Focus:** What angle/approach seems most comfortable to you? Recognize the potential limitations of a short essay. You can make a very effective point if you find an appropriate angle, but your essay will be hopelessly over-generalized if you don't consider and choose a *limited approach* to the issue. Look at your list of points for that limiting idea.
3. **Opposition:** Whom are you arguing against? Is there an attitude or opinion that you really want to speak against? You needn't—and in most cases, shouldn't—turn your paper into a sustained attack on the opposition, but do think about whether there is an opposition that can help you to clarify and define your central point. In other words, be mindful of counterarguments, even at the prewriting stage.

Developing a Provisional Thesis Idea

During the prewriting process, you should be wary about deciding upon a main point, or thesis, too quickly. An old chess proverb advises that “when you see a good move, *wait!*—there may be a better one,” and this adage applies perhaps with even greater force to writing. If during invention you are delving deeply into the ramifications and possibilities of the issue you are considering, then you will inevitably encounter any number of ideas that may seem to have the potential to serve as a thesis for your paper. If you immediately choose the first or second or even third that comes along, you may well be preventing yourself from eventually coming up with an even better idea. Moreover, the first ideas that come to mind are much less likely to offer scope for a fresh and creative argument, since such ideas are usually the first that occur to everyone else as well. Initial ideas are, in fact, very likely to represent just the sort of obvious or clichéd thinking that the invention process is meant to surpass.

At some point, of course, you do need to make at least a provisional commitment to one particular concept or rationale that will serve as the basis for your analysis or argument. In the romantic tradition, this commitment would be made in a sudden flash of inspiration, and sometimes a thesis idea will actually announce itself in that manner. More often, however, a thesis “promotes” itself from among the claims and ideas on your points-to-make list, when you gradually come to the realization that some concept you originally thought might govern a paragraph is actually resonant with many of the most promising points on your list. Napoleon said that each corporal in his army “carried a field marshal's baton in his knapsack,” by which he meant that he would promote soldiers from the ranks into the role of officers. When you notice a certain sort of “leadership” potential in one of the items on your points-to-make list, consider whether it might be promoted to higher rank.

In either case, whether your thesis comes in an epiphanic flash or gradually emerges from your points-to-make list, what you want to look for in a good provisional thesis are the qualities of connection and flexibility. Your thesis needs to be able to join—to connect and work with—any of the sub-arguments you want to include in your paper, and it must be flexible enough to permit adjustments and modifications as you actually write the paper. Your thought process doesn't end with the conclusion of your prewriting, and so you need to select a provisional thesis that will allow your argument or analysis to evolve.