Choosing a Topic & Developing a Research Question

English Transcript

You have a chance to research a topic, but which one? A topic that fits the assignment and that you are curious about will be more fun to research and to share with others. This video will show you some ways to develop your topic and research question.

The first step is to brainstorm interesting topics that are related to your assignment. When you're coming up with your topic, try to think of a few different ideas that you'd be interested in studying. Maybe you've read or heard news items about these topics, or maybe you talked about them in a class-- such as weather, westward expansion, or insects.

When you have a main topic or two in mind, brainstorm and write down all of the possible subtopics that pop into your head. Subtopics are the small ideas that connect to the big ideas. You have lots of good ideas.

Now, it's time to choose a topic. Think about your list. Which topics do you know the most about? Which are you most curious about? In this video, we have chosen the topic bees to use as our example.

Before you get started with your research, think about what you already know about bees. One useful tool for this is a KWL chart. K stands for Know, as in, "What do I know?" For instance, you may already know that not all bees sting; some bite. You also know that they live in hives, have wings, and make honey.

W stands for Wonder or Want, as in, "What do I wonder?" or "What do I want to know?" For example, you may want to know: how bees make honey, how do bees work together, and just what kind of bees there are?

L stands for Learn, as in, "What have I learned?" You'll use this space to reflect on your learning at the end of the project. Here's an example of a possible KWL chart on the topic of bees. Some of your want-to-know questions will be open questions, and some will be closed.

Closed questions are more basic and often begin with the words who, what, where, and when. A closed question has a simple answer that you should be able to find after doing a little bit of research.

Open questions are more complex and often begin with the word why. An open question may have more than one answer, requires more research, and may even lead to more questions.

Let's sort our questions about bees.

You may be able to revise some closed questions to be more open ended. For instance, the closed question-- How many different kinds of bees are there? -- can be revised to-- Why does the world need different species of bees? The new question is more complex and leads to deeper thinking.

An essential question is the focus of your research. It is rich and open ended. You do not know where it will lead you. The answers come from many sources, and you put them together to draw your own conclusions. To determine your essential question, review your list of open questions. You may need to revise these, too, to make them richer.

How do bees work together? -- could become -- How do bees work together as a community? Now we have two possible essential questions from our brainstorming. Choose the one that feels the most meaningful and interesting to you.

Once you determine an essential question, get it approved by your teacher. Then begin the process of choosing keywords, which you can learn about in the OSLIS video called, "Using Keywords."

For specific examples and for more information about this topic and the entire research process, explore OSLIS. Thank you to the Oregon CLIP Project for allowing the OSLIS Committee to adapt their tutorials. OSLIS-- Learn to Research. Research to Learn.