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The First Hurdle of Writing Anything: Topic Selection for Student Writing

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It is the night before the draft is due. I sit here at my desk, a blank document before me, the little gray marker flashing, awaiting letters, orders, a mission, a paper. I know I can write; I know that I can write well, even. But I have no clue what to write about, and I feel the weight - a sizable chunk of my grade - resting on a topic I have not chosen yet, the whole paper resting on this first step. I am paralyzed, anxious, afraid.

It is the night before another draft is due. I have almost 40 pages of scholarly journals before me and I have read every page twice over. The argument I need to make is clear. In fact, it is the same assignment everyone was told to write about. But I don't want to write it, and I feel my feet dragging defiantly into the earth, stopping me from boring myself half to death. I am obstinate, disinterested, dispassionate.

I was assigned to write an editorial with the topic open to any idea or concept related to writing theory. I was given full freedom to choose whatever I wanted, and I was petrified by the sheer number of options —everything and some. Yet, I'd choose this anxiety any day over having my topic selected for me, being shackled to an idea, forced to write words I couldn't care less about. Many other students feel very similarly, stunned by absolute freedom yet despising having our path limited. We can oftentimes feel dissatisfied with the whole project just because of how we receive our topic, which makes sense. The first hurdle sets up the whole race, and we dislike being presented with an immense first hurdle with a thousand and one ways to leap it just as much as we hate being hand-held over it. There is a certain level of guidance required in assigning a topic, a balance that both gives freedom and agency to the students throughout the semester and yet also provides them direction, pulling the best aspects from the all-topics and the one-topic approach.

When presenting a research project in any field, be it scientific study or literary analysis, faculty may find it easiest to take the straight and narrow road of the "one-topic-fits-all" approach, giving every single student the exact same prompt. This makes sense, given the immense spread of topics one can encounter across the numerous disciplines. Laurel Nesbitt and Dawn Kowalski of the WAC Clearinghouse list a variety of topics - from simply reporting the findings of a lab or study to selecting a topic of in-depth research from scratch (Nesbitt & Kowalski, 1994-2024). They describe how the choice of topic may be dictated by the current unit, the overall class, or, in the professional world, by some clear objective. So, to save the professor and the students time and stress, setting the topic for the whole class seems like a fast way to narrow things down and get to the actual meat of the assignment. John Bean, author of the widely cited book on writing theory *Engaging Ideas* mentions that this method is by far the easiest to teach around, to grade, and to aid with. Since it is the topic the whole class would focus on, time could and should be devoted to brainstorming, debating, and group exercises on the topic to ensure students have a strong foundation to write on (Bean, 2011, p. 104). That being said, this method of presenting a prompt runs the risk of losing a major aspect that determines student success: interest in the topic.

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Not every topic is going to be interesting to every student. I've been forced to write my fair share of papers that I did not care about, and they turned out fine. Still, my disinterest showed in my writing, evident in my use of filler words, shallow quotes, and being seven words over the word count—the bare minimum. This is what happens when students feel trapped, stripped of their individuality. There is the argument to be made that there is still freedom despite being constrained to a single topic, as Bean notes that students can display their individuality by staking a unique claim and supporting it in novel ways. In my personal experience, though, if I feel constrained, I'm not going to explore expressions within the box to make some personalized statement. I always choose the path of least resistance: the easiest argument to make, with the easiest to find sources, for the easiest to write paper. Without at least a mild amount of interest, the writing project will become an exercise in meeting a word count without retaining a single ounce of what was written about - a hardly worthwhile experience.

Okay, so don't narrow topics down. Let students have freedom to write as they please; the world is their metaphorical oyster for topic selection. They have full agency to choose a topic that peaks their interests. This topic agency is a vital part of *The Meaningful Writing Project*, a renowned and well-cited study focused on discovering what made writing assignments "meaningful" for students. They highlighted the importance of agency, saying, "We chose agency as one of our frameworks (along with engagement and learning to transfer) … for two primary reasons,"

summarized as passion for the subject matter and achievement of the general English goal of developing student agency (Eodice et al., 2017, p. 33). Throughout the following section, there were several direct quotes of students praising the freedom of topic or interest in research. Several of these quotes, though, make reference to a second aspect that needs to be considered if the assignment is to be successful: personal guidance.

As I mentioned earlier, I have a lot of anxiety when being asked to just choose a topic from scratch. So, when there is little guidance to aid in selecting, narrowing down, or handling a topic, many other students and I would not feel comfortable settling on anything. We don't want to pick a topic that won't earn us a good grade. If we do choose, we tend to overestimate the scope and grab a topic that is far too broad. We want to have enough content to fill a page and enough sources to hit requirements. Effective professors will personally help narrow down most topics to manageable, problem-focused phrases. These professors have noticed students' hesitance around broad assignment criteria and try to plan around this by providing assignments for students to receive feedback on prompts and drafts. These assignments are good in theory, but many students do not take these helpful process assignments as seriously as they should, submitting non-thought-out ideas as topics and outlines as drafts. The feedback on these is never as useful as feedback on a genuine idea would be, but it is the only feedback the professor can give.

Because the professor makes it the expectation to choose a topic, it makes it seem like selecting a subject is supposed to be easy. So, students will just procrastinate until it is too late, settling for a topic that may not even fit the guidelines. Without at least a certain level of guidance, both students and professors will be left struggling to reign in the vast spread of topics into a cohesive set of gradable assignments. There needs to be balance. There needs to be options.

What I propose is that these two extremes be explored on a spectrum, where first-year writers are given a narrow prompt and eventually, as assignments go on and class skill rises, students get more and more freedom. This allows new writers in the academic world to have clear guidelines and class time devoted to topics afforded by the narrow prompt. It teaches processes, making sure students know what to do before they can customize their approach to a subject matter. As they slowly learn to write at the college level, they get small tastes of choice. For some of the median assignments, professors can decide upon a list of potential topics for students to select from. Since there is a list, students are likely to find one they hold at least some interest in. The list can be a requirement at first, but eventually the option should be provided for students to propose another topic. That, or an approach can be taken like the aforementioned Meaningful Writing Project, where students were offered personalization options for their topic, but the basics of it were still structured. This allows the students to engage and expand upon the course, while the professor can change or veto if need be, helping mold the prompt to fit the assignment. Additionally, this list of example topics allows students guidance in what is expected of them and removes the pressure to design a topic without understanding what types of topics are best suited for the assignment or field as a whole.

It is the night when the final draft is due. I sit here at my desk, fingers tired and pages filled. The work is one of my best. The product - this method of presenting a selection of prompts for students, while slowly changing how strictly that selection decides the topic – is, I believe, the best method of providing topics to students. It takes the benefits of both extremes-the ease of guidance for single-topic assignments for technique prioritization and the freedom of choice from choose-your-own-topic assignments-and blends them into one cohesive plan, sacrificing a bit of both aspects to steadily teach students how to do the most pivotal part of writing, that first hurdle of topic selection. I am confident, affirmed, and above all, satisfied.

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Elijah Wilhelm is a senior at Park University studying English, with a minor in digital marketing and intent to become certified in Professional and Technical Writing. He served as Vice President for Park's chapter of Sigma Tau Delta in addition to undertaking an internship as a technical writer for the Army Corps of Engineers throughout 2024. He intends to pursue editorial work post-graduation, with the additional aspiration of novel writing in his spare time. He has always marveled at the impacts of writing on all facets of life and seeks to aid others in "turning good writing into gold."