The Curious Researcher A Guide to Writing Research Papers

By Bruce Ballinger

Exercise 1.1

Step 1: From time to time I'll hear a student say, "I'm just not interested in anything enough to write a paper about it." I don't believe it. Not for a second. The real problem is that the student simply hasn't taken the time to think about everything he knows and everything he might want to know. Try coaxing those things out of your head and onto paper by creating an "interest inventory."

Start with a blank journal page, or if you're using a word processor, define columns-say, three per page. Title the first column with one of the words below:

PLACES, TRENDS, THINGS, TECHNOLOGIES, PEOPLE, CONTROVERSIES, HISTORY, JOBS, HABITS, HOBBIES

Under the title, brainstorm a list of words (or phrases) that come to mind when you think about what you know and what you might want to know about the category. For example, under TRENDS you might be aware of the use of magnets for healing sore muscles, or you might know a lot about extreme sports. Put both down on the list. Don't censor yourself. Just write down whatever comes to mind, even if it makes sense only to you. This list is for your use only. You'll probably find that ideas to you in waves—you'll jot down a few things and draw a blank. Wait for the next wave to come and ride it. But if you're seriously becalmed, start a new column with a new word from the list above and brainstorm ideas in that category. Do this at least four times with different words. Feel free to return to any column to add ideas as they come to you, and don't worry about repeated items. Some things simply straddle more than one category. For an idea of what this might look like, see what I did with this exercise (Figure 1.1, below).

Allot a total of twenty minutes to do this step: ten minutes to generate lists in four or more categories, a few minutes to walk away from it and think about something else, and the remaining time to return and add items to any column as

they occur to you. (The exercise will also work well if you work on it over several days. You'd be amazed at how much information you can generate.)

STEP 2: Review your lists look for a single item in any column that seems promising. Ask yourself these questions: Is this something that raises questions that research can help answer? Are they potentially interesting questions? Does this item get at something you've always wondered about? Might it open doors to knowledge you think is important, fascinating, or relevant to your own life?

Circle the item.

PLACES	TRENDS	TECHNOLOGIES	HISTORY
Great Lakes	Hiking	Computer	Vietnam
BWCA	Cell phones	Palm Pilot/PDAs	Chicago Fire
Sawtooths	Coffeehouses	Children's software	Chicago River reversal
Boise River	Barbies	Camcorder	Pioneer Television

Step 3: For the item you circled, generate a list of questions – as many as you can that you'd love to explore about the subject. Here's what I did with my declining songbird topic:

What role does habitat destruction play in the decline?

Is this connected to rain forest destruction?

Which kinds of birds are most affected?

What has been the rate of decline? Wit it get worse?

What, if anything, are governments or other organizations doing to address the problem?

Is there anyone who doesn't think this is a problem at all?

What exactly might I notice if I returned home to Chicago and went back to the Skokie Lagoons to see the warblers in May? How would it compare to my experience twenty-five years ago?

What are the impacts on other, less affected species of birds?

Why, finally, does it matter that the warblers may be disappearing? What's at stake?

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