

## SAMPLE TOPIC PROPOSAL

*Please note that I could have also done this as a series of paragraphs. I have chosen to use the listed questions as a guide so you are able to see the specific answers I have provided for each question. In some places, additional commentary has been added to explain and clarify certain things.*

- 1. *What is your proposed topic?*** The challenges of teaching composition to college freshmen in the community college
- 2. *Why you are interested in this topic?*** As a professor of composition at a community college, it is important for me to understand both the challenges my students have when entering my classroom as well as the challenges I will have teaching this often unwanted area of study to my students, since many of them have a dislike for English. From my own experiences as a student, I have adopted particular methods and a specific philosophy of teaching that conflict with students' initial expectations. I am interested in finding ways to bridge the gap.
- 3. *What do you already know about the topic?*** With my Masters degree in English and having taught English composition for many years at Ivy Tech, I know a great deal about teaching composition overall. I know the basic demographics of the students I teach, and I know what writing issues seem to be common among incoming freshmen. I also know that students typically don't want to take a writing course and have particular expectations on what it should (and should not) include. I have information from other instructors in a variety of areas that also helps me to understand the concerns about this topic. I know some information about how the current school system works and how that contributes somewhat to the issues with incoming students.
- 4. *What do you need to know/don't know about the topic?*** I don't know the specific statistics relating to student demographics. There are some styles of teaching (pedagogy) that I am unfamiliar with and could look into. I don't have a full list of what kinds of things are currently happening in the high school English classes which may widen the gap further between where high school ends and college expectations begin. I don't have as much specific teaching knowledge that directly deals with older non-traditional students and students who speak English as a second language. I don't know as much about how learning styles impact community college students as opposed to traditional university students.
- 5. *What is your research question?*** While there are numerous questions I could ask about this (I could try to determine what those challenges are, I could identify a specific challenge and analyze it, etc), I have decided to ask this question: Do learning styles play a greater role in composition learning outcomes in a community college than in a university? I may have to restrict this further to particular groups within the community college though - are there differences in learning styles between the traditional age community college students versus the older displaced workers? This essay will try to determine whether or not those learning styles have a larger impact on composition learning outcomes in one type of institution than another.

6. **What is the intended GOAL/PURPOSE?** Until I do more research, my purpose might be a bit less focused, but right now I want to try to persuade my audience that there is a distinct difference in how learning styles impact composition at the community college level than at the university level. This is partly to raise awareness of the issue, but could even expand into a desire to persuade community college composition instructors to adopt different methods of teaching for their students - it really depends on what research I find. While this purpose may seem initially vague or more informative, I am still trying to prove there is a difference because of learning styles. My research question helps with this goal - the focus is on community colleges and showing a greater impact there.
7. **Who is the INTENDED AUDIENCE?** While this may change, from my initial research question it seems that my audience would be peers of mine - faculty who teach English composition to incoming freshmen. It might include both community college and university faculty, but my purpose doesn't really fit both groups (though it could be adapted to do so - university instructors might be interested in seeing that there is a difference; however, my concerns - that community college students struggle more because of this - doesn't really include university students as part of this concern. There might also end up being particular types of sub-groups that I could focus on further (for instance, does geographic locale make a difference? Commuter campuses versus ones which combines commuters with residential facilities?) My colleagues may or may not really disagree - it may be that they don't even realize there is a difference, or feel it is of negligible importance. I may have to spend part of the essay demonstrating why this is a critical issue for consideration - showing the effects of this, rather than just showing a link between the ideas.
8. **Why is this important?** As a teacher of composition at a community college, I want to make sure that I teach my students in the most effective ways possible. If learning styles do have a larger impact on students in community colleges, then I need to be aware of this (and potentially consider solutions). This is also important for the students themselves - while not the intended audience, this topic does impact them because it suggests that instructors might not be adapting their pedagogy (teaching methodology) to the needs of the students, which leads to lesser learning outcomes.
9. **Fill in the blanks:** There are a couple of directions I could go now. If I fill in the blanks with just the information I've used above, I end up with something like: "I want to persuade composition instructors at community college that they need to be aware that learning styles play a larger role for community college students in their courses than those at a university because it can affect student success and may indicate a need for community college instructors to adapt their pedagogy to better meet the needs of their students." Rather wordy, though, isn't it? And it suggests that my initial purpose might not be strong enough or worded well. But as a starting point, this is acceptable. It not only plugs in what I've already come up with, but it's obviously leading me to reconsider my focus and take this to a deeper level.
10. **Debatability:** This is a fairly contentious topic - while few will initially disagree that there are differences between these two groups of students and how they learn (since some students do end up at community college because their learning styles clash with the traditional methods of instruction in the public school system), many would disagree that it's a huge issue or that it's having a real effect on students. Instructors can be very resistant to changes in their teaching styles. This topic actually becomes the stepping stone into larger debates - if there is a

severe difference, should community college instructors be required to make changes? Who will dictate those changes? What changes are needed? Will it involve the need for the instructors to take more education courses to help them adapt? Many additional questions are raised in this topic, each worthy of its own paper and exploration.

#### ADDITIONAL COMMENTS:

This is by no means the only direction this topic could go. I could reframe this as a problem/solution paper, rather than a comparison/contrast paper (with elements of evaluation). If I change the type of paper, it could change my audience - if there is a huge difference, I could try to address the instructors themselves, the administrators (who determine policy), or even legislators (who create the regulations and laws governing a lot of education).