

# **TEACHING INFORMATION LITERACY**

**A Conceptual Approach**

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The Scarecrow Press, Inc.  
Lanham, Maryland • Toronto • Plymouth, UK  
2008



SCARECROW PRESS, INC.

Published in the United States of America  
by Scarecrow Press, Inc.  
A wholly owned subsidiary of  
The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
www.scarecrowpress.com

Estover Road  
Plymouth PL6 7PY  
United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Gavin, Christy, 1952–

Teaching information literacy : a conceptual approach / Christy Gavin.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8108-5202-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)


ISBN-10: 0-8108-5202-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Information literacy—Study and teaching (Higher) 2. Research—Methodology—Study and teaching (Higher) 3. Library orientation for college students. 4. Electronic information resource literacy—Study and teaching (Higher) 5. Internet research—Study and teaching (Higher) 6. Internet searching—Study and teaching (Higher) I. Title.

ZA3075.G38 2008

028.7071'1—dc22

2007017222

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.  
Manufactured in the United States of America.

# I

## SELECTING AND NARROWING TOPICS

Basic research is what I do when I don't know what I am doing.<sup>1</sup>

Goal: To formulate a viable topic.

Objective 1: Select a topic.

Objective 2: Narrow a topic.

**S**electing a subject stymies most undergraduates. Why? They often approach a subject at a distinct disadvantage: they know virtually little or nothing about the subject area they are to research. If asked, most students can write a short essay on their favorite hobbies in twenty minutes, yet few of those same students can write five paragraphs on the theory of relativity. Writing about what is familiar is much easier than writing about what is alien. Therefore, students must begin the topic development process by discovering what has been said by others about a subject.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND INSTRUCTOR ACTIVITIES

#### **Objective 1: Select a Topic.**

A plethora of media offers students an endless supply of possible subjects to study. Many of these sources can also provide a deep back-

ground of a subject. Most are jargon-free and can increase students' stores of knowledge while affording them a jumping-off place for ideas from which to develop a research question. Encourage students to browse the following:

- textbooks
- specialized encyclopedias
- popular or trade magazines
- library and bookstore shelves
- Web directories (e.g., Google)
- tables of contents of key journals

For students who explore the pros and cons of an issue, point them toward sources that bring together arguments representing the various sides of an issue. The following sources provide topics and background material for controversial subjects:

- Taking Sides series (McGraw Hill/Dushkin) ([www.dushkin.com/takingsides](http://www.dushkin.com/takingsides))
- Opposing Viewpoints series (Greenhaven Press) ([www.wadsworth.com/pubco/serv\\_opposing.html](http://www.wadsworth.com/pubco/serv_opposing.html))

Nontraditional media can also be a source of research topics. These may include TV and radio talk shows, news programs, and even movies. For example, the film *A Beautiful Mind* could inspire a student to explore the destigmatization of schizophrenia.

## **Objective 2: Narrow a Topic.**

Scenario:

CRIMINOLOGY STUDENT: Okay, I got a subject, "crimes in America." Now what do I do?

INSTRUCTOR: Read and question.

CRIMINOLOGY STUDENT: Huh?

Once a topic has been chosen, the tendency of novice researchers is to use Google to retrieve the required number of sources and string

them together to obtain the requisite number of pages. They turn in papers with the belief that they have done research, yet they are astonished to learn that their poor grades are due to lack of cohesiveness and weak research. Contrary to what many students believe, research is not simply “looking up stuff,” but rather a systematic inquiry into a distinct aspect of a topic. To initiate a systematic inquiry, students must conduct preliminary research by finding a few sources on a topic, skimming the material, selecting what is useful, and then reading it closely. This way, students gain a working knowledge of the topic and are in a much better position to determine what research approaches are worth investigating.

Narrowing a topic works best if three basic investigative tools (heuristics) are used:

1. **Brainstorming:** helps to break down subject.
2. **Clustering and classifying:** helps to organize ideas generated by brainstorming.
3. **Asking questions:** initiates an understanding of the subject and exploration of its facets.

The following section shows how these heuristic tools can be used in the topic development process.

**1. Brainstorming** During the topic-development stage, brainstorming, or free associating, is an excellent way of stimulating creativity. Developed by advertising executive Alex Osborn, brainstorming encourages freewheeling ideas, no matter how wild, mundane, profound, or silly.<sup>2</sup> As more ideas emerge, students build upon them or combine them with other ideas. And because brainstorming discourages tunnel vision and the evaluation of ideas, the tendency to censor topics is less likely to occur.

**2. Clustering and Classifying** Clustering and classifying are strategies that students use to record information generated by brainstorming. These techniques help students ascertain patterns and connections between known facts and new ideas and concepts.

**2a. Clustering** Clustering is random and nonlinear and thus appeals to students who are visual or intuitive learners. The following steps outline clustering:

1. Select the subject "crime" and brainstorm subtopics.
2. Select one of the subtopics.
3. Brainstorm the subtopic.
4. Focus on one of the sub-subtopics.
5. Research the sub-subtopic.

Figures 1.1 through 1.3 illustrate the clustering process. Steps 3 and 4 (figure 1.2) involve students reading articles on Internet stock fraud for ideas on how to approach the topic. Thus, step 5 (figure 1.3) in the cluster process might look like this:

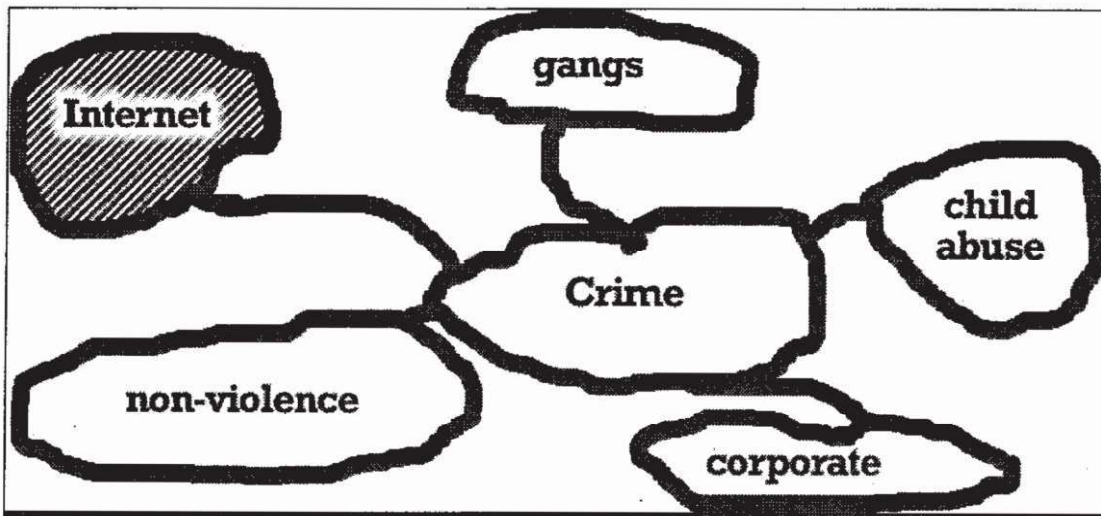


Figure 1.1 Step (1) Select the subject Crime and brainstorm subtopics, Step (2) Choose one of the subtopics

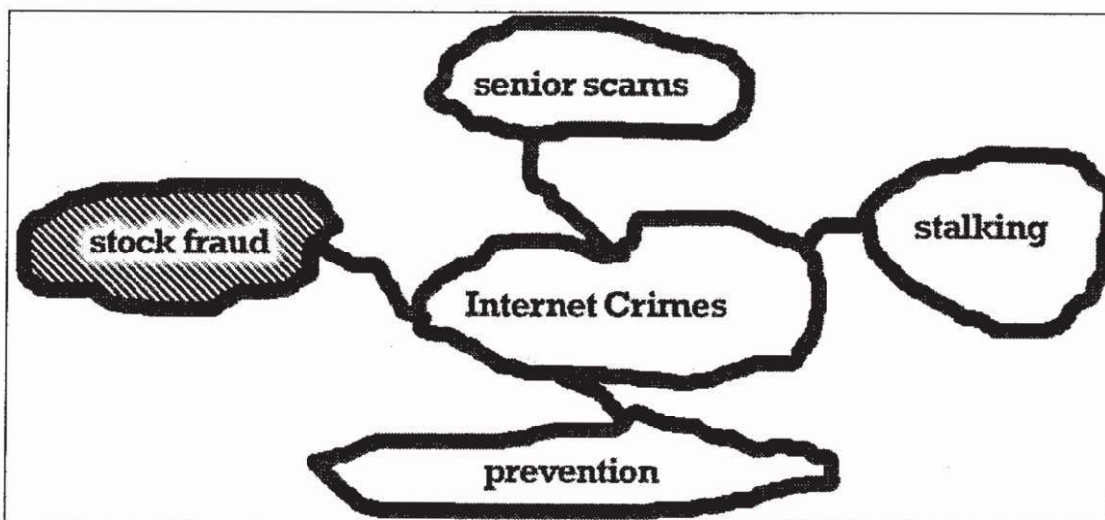


Figure 1.2 Step (3) Brainstorm the subtopic, Step (4) Focus on one of the sub-subtopics

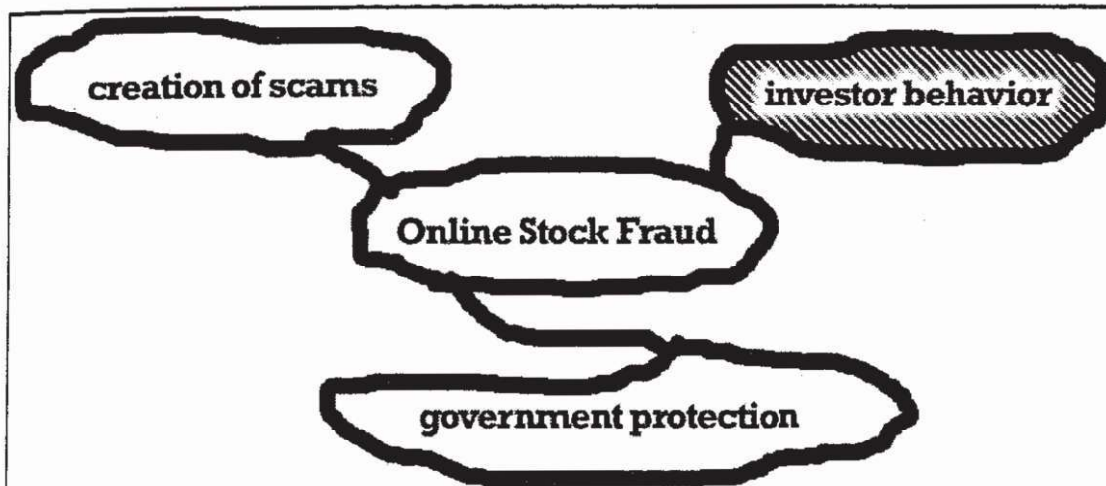


Figure 1.3 Step (5) Focus on online stock fraud and investor behavior

See examples 1.1 through 1.5 for more models of clustering.

*2b. Classifying* Unlike clustering, the classification device orders information sequentially, which appeals to linear thinkers who are more comfortable with a systematic approach, beginning with A and working through a sequence until completing Z. For example:

Topic:

Place:

Time period:

Person/group (historical figure, population segment, political entity):

Event or Aspect:

Problem or Issue:

The following example illustrates how the topic “Internet” can be narrowed by classifying it:

Topic: Internet

Place: United States

Time period: last ten years

Person/group: investors

Aspect: online fraud

Problem: protecting investors from online scams

See example 1.6 for more models of classifying.

### Objective 3: Asking Questions.

While asking questions of the material should be done at all stages of the term-paper process, it is especially powerful in topic development. Queries, particularly open-ended queries, enable students to explore what is under the surface of a subject in order to discover its hidden terrains. The following discusses specific heuristic guides that can help students begin the query process.

Students can begin their questions by using the traditional reporter query words: Who? What? Where? Why? When? How? For example, a student could explore the topic “online investment scams” by asking:

- Who are the victims of Internet fraud? Who tempts them?
- Why do investors become victims of online scams?
- What kinds of scams occur? What is being done to protect investors? and
- How do these scams work? How do investors avoid them?

If students are examining points of view, they may begin their questions with: *if*, *should*, *does*, *will*, and *can*. Or, students beginning to explore scientific topics can begin their queries with the following phrases: “Is there a correlation between . . . ?” or “Is there a relationship between . . . ?”

A variation on the above set of “reporter” questions is rhetorician Kenneth Burke’s<sup>3</sup> pentad of key terms—act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose:

Act: What was done? What took place in thought or deed?

Scene: When or where was the act done? What the was background of the act? What was the situation in which it occurred?

Agent: Who did the act? What kind of person[s]?

Agency: How did they do the act? What means or instruments did they use?

Purpose: Why was the act done?

These key terms serve as a way to investigate the motivations of human action. The pentad works very well in researching literary texts.

The following questions were developed by Jacqueline Berke and Randal Woodland:<sup>4</sup>



- How can X be described?
- How did X happen?
- What kind of person is X?
- What is my memory of X?
- What is my personal response to X?
- What are the facts about X?
- What does X mean?
- What is the essential function of X?
- What are the component parts of X?
- How is X made or done?
- What are the causes of X?
- What are the consequences of X?
- What are the types of X?
- How does X compete with Y?
- What is the present status of X?
- How can X be summarized?
- How should X be interpreted?
- What is the value of X?
- What case can be made for or against X?

See examples 1.7 through 1.12 for more models of framing questions.

Asking questions stimulates further thinking about the subject. And, with practice, students will gain query skills that will strengthen their ability to make sense of the material, retain information, and synthesize and evaluate information. Moreover, students will soon learn to use tools of inquiry to critique their own term papers and determine if a particular section is unclear or needs to be fleshed out.

The investigative tools of clustering, classifying, and querying challenge students to look below the surface of a topic in pursuit of truth. The payoff, students soon realize, is that they have gained control over something that they initially perceived as an overwhelming, chaotic jumble of information. As students grasp the big picture and what lies beyond it, their self-confidence increases, motivating them to focus on a particular angle and pursue its intricacies.

The key to success at the topic-development stage is creative inquiry. This particular learning process conflicts with the learning processes

students are exposed to in elementary and secondary school where, in the era of standardized testing, information is given to them in bits and pieces, encouraging students to be dependent on teachers as dispensers of information. Yet, success in creative thinking and problem solving depends upon the learner's ability to acquire knowledge independently by searching for answers and finding solutions to problems.

## **CLASS ACTIVITIES**

### **One-Hour Sessions**

1. One-hour sessions do not allow much time for discussion to develop topics, however students will pay attention if library research strategies are linked to the topics that they must address.
2. When introducing key sources in a discipline or subject area, such as special encyclopedias or handbooks, emphasize how these sources can help students narrow their topics. If time permits, select an entry from one of the sources and demonstrate the narrowing process by highlighting subtopics mentioned in the entry.
3. To show the brainstorming process, write a broad topic on the board. Ask the class to cluster ideas. Then, focus on one subtopic and ask them to them develop a research question based on the subtopic. See examples 1.1 through 1.12.

### **Multiple Sessions and Courses**

1. Incorporate strategies mentioned in the previous section on one-hour sessions.
2. If the topic is a controversial social issue, have students brainstorm different perspectives. For example, "school prayer" will be viewed differently by an atheist, a Catholic, a Republican, and a Democrat.
3. Write a broad topic on the board. Have students practice clustering, classifying, and querying by assigning them a broad topic (see examples 1.1 through 1.12). Discuss their results in class. Then, focus on one subtopic (or connect it to another) and develop a rough research

- question. Discuss. Follow up by asking students to develop their own topic by using clustering, classifying, and querying.
4. Show how research questions can be converted into a rough thesis statement. See chapter 2 for information on thesis development.
  5. While many students tend to tackle a broad topic, others begin too narrowly, such as “teen pregnancy in Smalltown, U.S.A.” Short of using local resources, this sort of topic will be very difficult to research. Show how narrowing techniques can also assist in broadening a topic to a manageable size.
  6. Ask students to keep a research journal. On a cognitive level, the use of a research journal helps students think through what they are planning, doing, and learning and helps them think about and question the actual process of research. On a practical level, a research journal helps students become more organized and provides a place for dialogue between the librarian, the composition instructor, and the student.<sup>5</sup>
  7. Help students understand how topics germinate in the professional realm.

## **INSTRUCTOR GUIDES, HANDOUTS, AND EXERCISES**

1. Examples 1.1–1.5: Clustering examples
2. Example 1.6: Classifying examples
3. Examples 1.7–1.12: Framing questions examples
4. Example 1.13: Topic development exercise

## **Websites on Topic Development**

1. California State University, Bakersfield Library, “Developing a Topic,” [www.csub.edu/library/infocomp.shtml](http://www.csub.edu/library/infocomp.shtml). Provides explanations and examples on narrowing a topic.
2. LeTourneau University, Owlet Writing and Learning, “Stock Issues in Argument” (2002), [owlet.letu.edu/contenthtml/research/stockissues.html](http://owlet.letu.edu/contenthtml/research/stockissues.html) stockissues.html. Provides a detailed chart of questions to ask when exploring an issue or solving a problem.

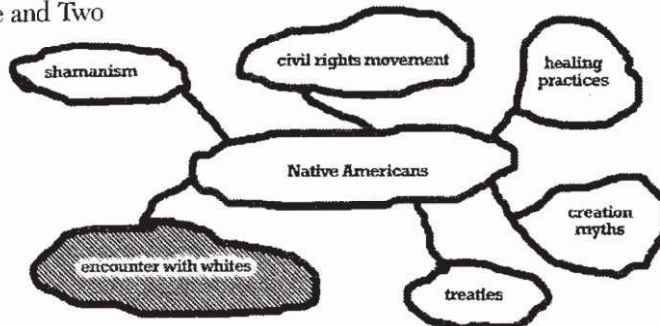
3. Online Library Learning, "Unit Two: Starting Your Research," [www.usg.edu/galileo/skills/unit02/index.phtml](http://www.usg.edu/galileo/skills/unit02/index.phtml). Tutorial introduces users to developing topics and choosing appropriate sources.
4. Pennsylvania State University Libraries, "Concept Map" (November 9, 2006), [www.libraries.psu.edu/instruction/infolit/andyou/mod1/pre.htm](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/instruction/infolit/andyou/mod1/pre.htm). Exercise on developing topics using the clustering method.
5. Radford University, "Library Tutorial: Research Strategy" (September 14, 2005), [lib.radford.edu/Tutorial](http://lib.radford.edu/Tutorial). Introduces students to developing a topic and creating search statements.
6. State University of New York, Oswego, "Information Literacy Tutorial" (July 12, 2005), [www.oswego.edu/library/tutorial](http://www.oswego.edu/library/tutorial). Presents the basics of topic development with examples drawn from *CQ Researcher*. Includes a worksheet.
7. University of Buffalo, "Research Assistant: Choosing a Topic," [ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/asl/tutorials/research.html](http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/asl/tutorials/research.html). Connects explanations of developing a topic with concrete examples.
8. University of Richmond, "Getting Started: Brainstorming," [writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/brainst.html](http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/brainst.html). Illustrates brainstorming by developing the topic "ethics of cigarette advertising."
9. University of Texas, Austin, "Substantial Writing Component Resources: Brainstorming" (2002), [www.swc.utexas.edu/planning/process.shtml](http://www.swc.utexas.edu/planning/process.shtml). Discusses a variety of brainstorming techniques.
10. University of Utah, Health Sciences Library, "Internet Navigator: Modules 3," [www-navigator.utah.edu](http://www-navigator.utah.edu). This interactive tutorial includes assignments and quizzes.
11. University of Wyoming Libraries, "TIP: Tutorial for Information Power," [tip.uwyo.edu/introl.htm](http://tip.uwyo.edu/introl.htm). Includes an exercise on determining appropriate research questions.

### Assessment Tools

1. To reinforce what they have learned, ask students to narrow their own topics by using one or more of the narrowing strategies discussed in this chapter. See examples 1.1 through 1.12.
2. Example 1.13 is an exercise that asks students to cluster, classify, and query a topic of their choice.

**APPENDIX: EXAMPLES**

Steps One and Two



Steps Three and Four

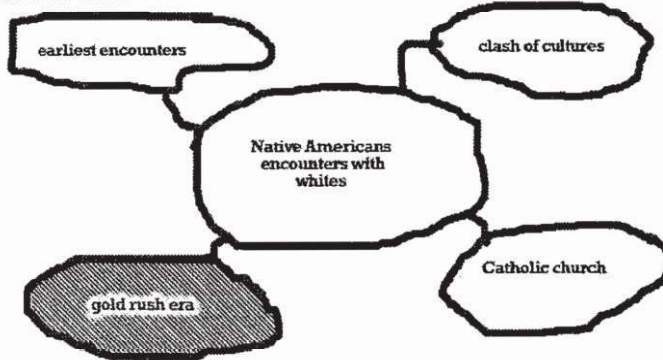
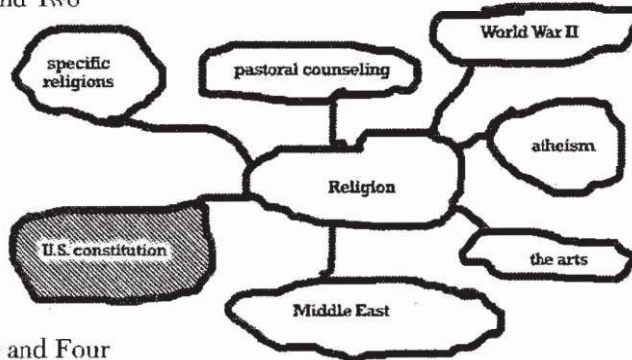


Figure 1.4

**Example 1.1: Clustering Example, Native Americans**

Steps One and Two



Steps Three and Four

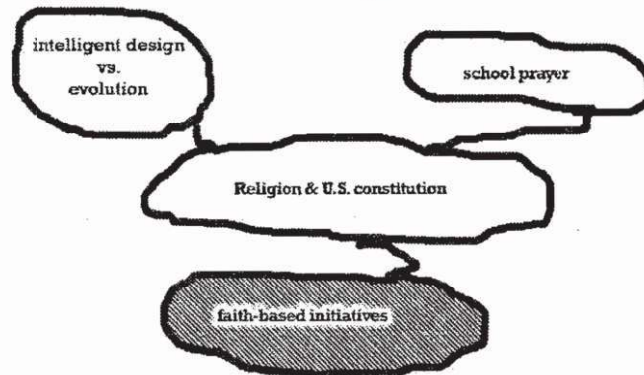
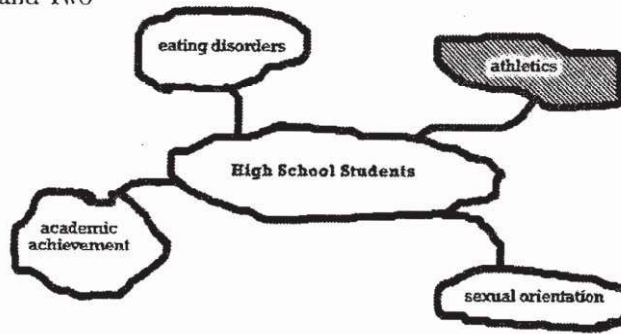


Figure 1.5

**Example 1.2: Clustering Example, Religion**

Steps One and Two



Steps Three and Four

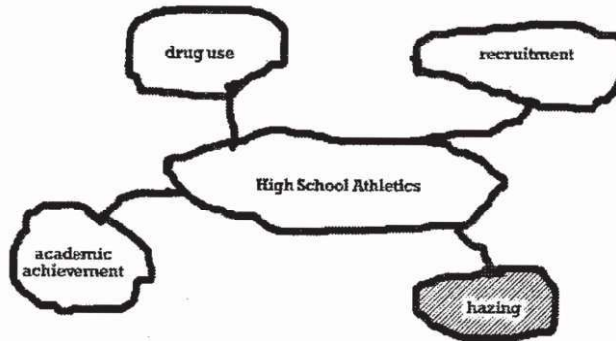


Figure 1.6

**Example 1.3: Clustering Example, High School Students**

Steps One and Two

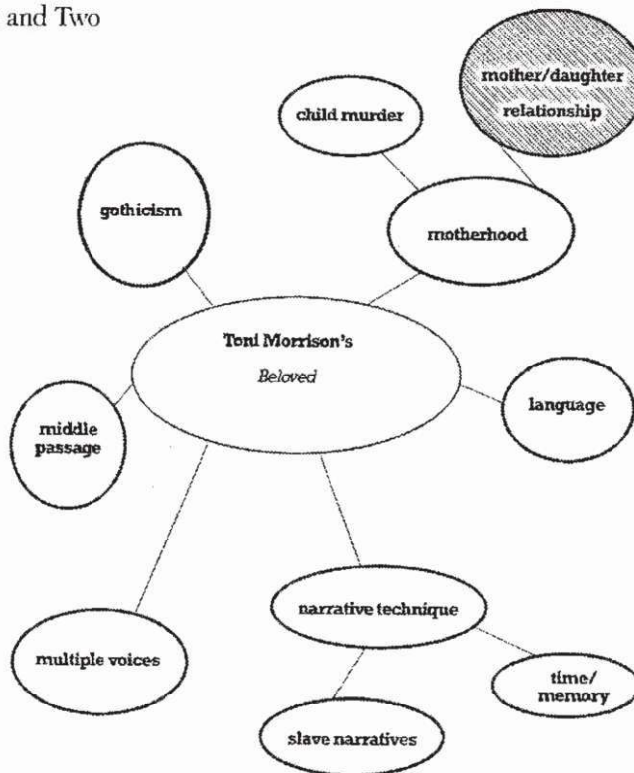
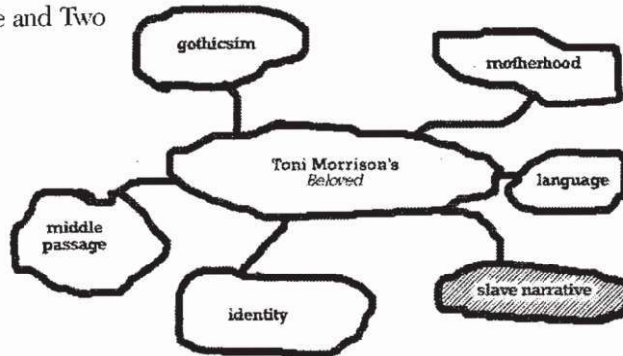


Figure 1.7

**Example 1.4: Clustering Example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved***

Steps One and Two



Steps Two and Three

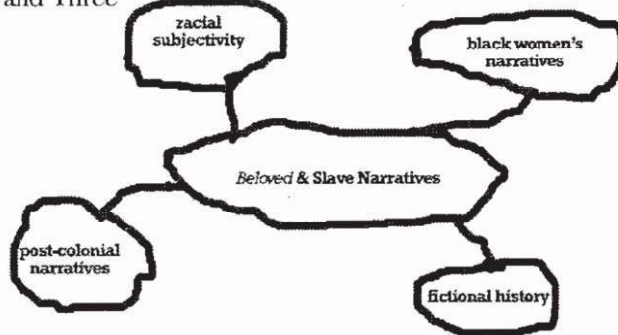
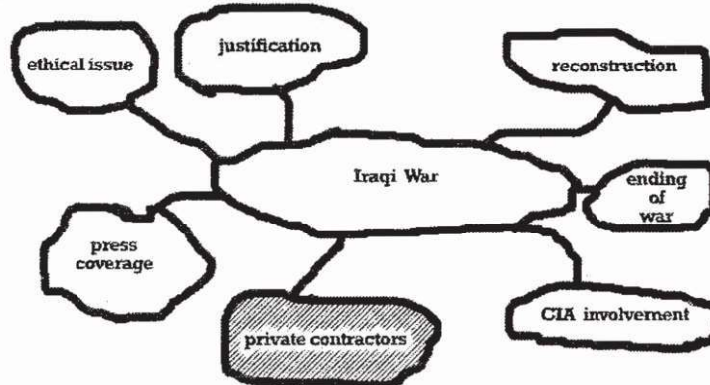


Figure 1.8  
 Example 1.4: Clustering Example, *Beloved* and Slave Narratives

Steps One and Two



Steps Three and Four

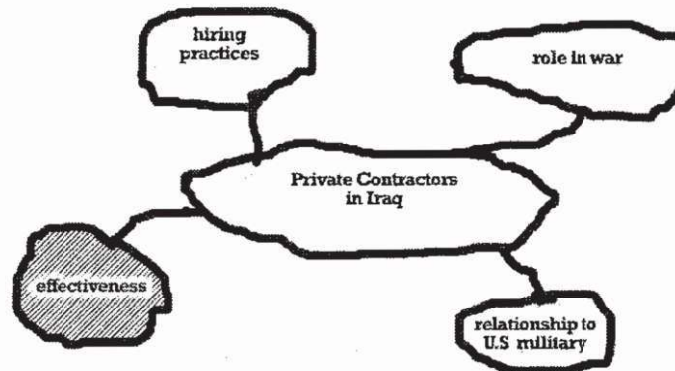


Figure 1.9  
 Example 1.5: Clustering Example, Iraqi War

**Example 1.6: Classifying Examples**

1. Topic: American Indians  
Place: California  
Time: nineteenth century  
Event: gold rush  
Problem: How were the cultural life and the environment of American Indians disrupted by the influx of gold seekers?
2. Topic: religion  
Place: United States  
Time period: 2001 to present  
Person/group: Bush administration  
Aspect: faith-based initiatives  
Issue: Have faith-based initiatives been effective?
3. Topic: high school students  
Place: United States  
Time period: present  
Person/group: student athletes  
Issue: Why is hazing becoming increasingly violent?
4. Topic: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*  
Person/group: Sethe, Denver, and Beloved  
Problem: How does Sethe define Beloved and Denver as daughters?
5. Topic: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*  
Historical group: slaves  
Aspect: slave narratives  
Problem: In what ways does Morrison subvert the traditional slave narrative?
6. Topic: Iraqi War  
Person/group: private contractors  
Issue: Are private contractors effective in the reconstruction of Iraq?

**Example 1.7: Framing Questions, American Indians**

1. What impact did the huge population influx during the gold rush have on California American Indians?



2. How did American Indians react to whites migrating to California?
3. How did whites perceive the American Indians?
4. Did American Indians mine gold? If so, were they free agents or did they work for whites?
5. How did the white miners treat American Indian miners? Were there tensions in the gold fields?
6. Why did the government pass laws that discriminated against American Indians?
7. In what ways were the cultural life and the environment of American Indians disrupted by the influx of gold seekers?
8. Was gold valued by American Indians before the appearance of whites?

### **Example 1.8: Framing Questions, Faith-Based Initiatives**

1. Why did President Bush open federal funding to religious organizations?
2. Does federal funding undermine separation of church and state?
3. Since their inception in 2001, have faith-based initiatives been effective?
4. Do all religions qualify for funding?
5. Have religious organizations received federal funding prior to the faith-based initiatives?
6. Will federal funding be available for programs run by the Nation of Islam?

### **Example 1.9: Framing Questions, High School Hazing**

1. Who participates in high school hazing?
2. What is hazing?
3. What is the purpose of hazing rituals? Are they useful in teaching pledges certain values?
4. If so, what values?
5. What can coaches and administrators do to reduce hazing crimes?
6. What is being done to stop hazing-related violence?

7. How does the sport culture foster hazing?
8. Why do students participate in hazing?
9. Why is hazing becoming increasingly violent?
10. Should hazing be banned?
11. Should prosecutors file charges against violent hazers?
12. If so, what are some healthy alternatives that can replace students' unfulfilled needs that hazing satisfies?
13. Is there a correlation between poor self-esteem and hazing?

**Example 1.10: Framing Questions, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Motherhood**

1. How does Sethe see herself?
2. What kind of mother is she?
3. Why did Sethe kill her baby?
4. What circumstances drove Sethe to kill her baby?
5. What were the consequences of her act?
6. When did Sethe realize that *Beloved* was her dead child?
7. Does Denver love her mother? If so, how does she love her?
8. What relationship did Sethe have with her mother?
9. Does *Beloved* have more than one "mother"?
10. How do *Beloved* and Denver define Sethe as a mother?
11. How does Sethe define *Beloved* and Denver as daughters?

**Example 1.11: Framing Questions, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Slave Narratives**

1. What is a slave narrative?
2. Why were slave narratives published? What was their purpose?
3. How do the narratives of slave women differ from those of their male counterparts?
4. Are there similarities and differences between *Beloved* and traditional slave narratives?
5. How does *Beloved* fit in the tradition of neo-slave narratives?
6. Does *Beloved* subvert the traditional forms of the slave narrative?

7. Why did Morrison use the slave narrative as a writing strategy?

### **Example 1.12: Framing Questions, Private Contractors in Iraq**

1. What is the role of private contractors working on U.S.-funded projects in Iraq?
2. What are the benefits of relying on the private sector for support services and operations?
3. What major projects have been completed by private contractors in Iraq?
4. How effective are private contractors in completing government contracts?
5. Have private contractors been involved in illegal actions?

### **Example 1.13: Topic Development, Exercise**

Choose a topic related to your research project. To help you narrow the topic, use the methods discussed in class: clustering, classifying, and questioning.

1. Identify your general topic.
2. Narrow the topic by using these methods:
  - A. Clustering
  - B. Classifying:
    - Place:
    - Time:
    - Person/group:
    - Event or aspect:
    - Problem or issue:

#### **C. Questioning**

Explore your topic further by writing four questions concerning your topic. Your questions should be specific. For example, the question “Is animal experimentation good?” is vague. Rephrase for a more thought-provoking question, such as “How reliable is animal-based research?”

List at least two sources that you have used that have helped you better understand your topic. Include: title of source, author of source, and date.

**NOTES**

1. Wernher von Braun, German American rocket scientist.
2. Alex Osborn, *Applied Imagination: Principles and Procedures for Creative Problem Solving*. (New York: Scribner, 1961).
3. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1945.), xv.
4. Jacqueline Berke and Randal Woodland. *Twenty Questions for the Writer: A Rhetoric with Readings*. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 89–90. Refer to their text for further discussion and examples.
5. For additional information on research journals, see Trixie G. Smith, “Keeping Track: Librarians and Composition Instructors, and Student Writers Use the Research Journal,” *Research Strategies* 18 (2001): 21–28.