I know of a high school English class in Indiana in which the students are explicitly told that their paper grades will not be affected by anything they say; required to write a paper a week, they are graded simply on the number of spelling and grammatical errors. What is more, they are given a standard form for their papers: each paper is to have three paragraphs, a beginning, a middle, and an end—or is it an introduction, a body, and a conclusion? The theory seems to be that if the student is not troubled about having to say anything, or about discovering a good way of saying it, he can then concentrate on the truly important matter of avoiding mistakes.
What is “the truly important matter”? 
“All conversations (including writing) are social activities in which we are expected to play our parts” (p. 16).

Researchers

1. “I’ve found some new and interesting information.”

2. “I’ve found a solution to an important practical problem.”

3. “I’ve found an answer to an important question.”
Readers

1. “Entertain me”

2. “Help me solve my practical problem”

3. “Help me understand something better” (p. 18-23)
The only protection from this destructive type of concern for the audience is the control of substance, of having something solid to say. Our students bore us, even when they take a seemingly lively controversial tone, because they have nothing to say, to us or to anybody else. If and when they discover something to say, they will no longer bore us, and our comments will no longer bore them. Having something to say, they will be interested in learning how to say it better. Having something to say, they can be taught how to give a properly controversial edge to what will by its nature be controversial—nothing, after all, is worth saying that everybody agrees on already.
Selecting a topic

“A research topic is an interest stated specifically enough for you to imagine becoming a local expert on it” (p. 36).

1. “Find a topic specific enough to let you master a reasonable amount of information on it in the time you have.”

2. “Question that topic until you find questions that catch your interest.”

3. “Determine the kind of evidence your readers will expect you to offer in support of your answer.”

4. “Determine whether you can find [that evidence].” (p. 31-2)
1. “Find a topic specific enough to let you master a reasonable amount of information on it in the time you have.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The novels of Tolstoy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The death penalty</td>
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</table>
1. Narrow your general interest by asking *what about* Tolstoy, or *what about* the death penalty, specifically?

The death penalty → *Katharsis* for the families of victims of violent crimes
2. **Focus that** by including action verbs that express relationships.

   - to refute
   - to conflict
   - to develop
   - to underestimate
   - to contribute
   - to diminish
   - to betray
   - to detract
   - to challenge ...
3. Rephrase *that* by composing a complete sentence that stages these relationships and demonstrates that your interest is dynamic.

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For the victims of violent crimes, the emotional power of *katharsis* contributes to *the death penalty's* lasting appeal.
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2. “Question that topic until you find questions that catch your interest.”

“If a writer asks no specific question worth asking, he can offer no specific answer worth supporting” (p. 41).

Reality TV → ???
Questions about the history of your topic

Developmental context

— What does reality TV respond to? What came before it? Why did it supplant programmed shows? What might come next?

Internal history

— What has been the evolution of reality TV? How are shows now different from the first shows? How have viewers’ opinions about reality TV changed?
Questions about the topic’s structure and composition

Larger context

—What does reality TV reflect about our desires and values? What role does reality TV play in different classes? Races? Genders? What does reality TV do to advertising and marketing? What does reality TV do to literacy in younger students?

Component parts

—What features of reality TV are most prominent? Why do most reality TV shows feature beautiful people? Why do most reality TV shows have a “voting” aspect for viewers?
Questions about the ways your topic can be categorized

Kinds or types

— What are the different kinds of reality TV shows? What are the different types of “actors” on reality TV shows?

Comparisons and contrasts

— How are reality TV shows on basic cable channels different from those on broadcast networks?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reality TV</th>
<th>?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reality TV</td>
<td>What about reality TV?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality TV</td>
<td>People who lack talent can still become celebrities, like the Kardashians</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. “Question that topic until you find questions that catch your interest.”
3. Motivate the questions that catch your interest by thinking of your *telos* (objective).
1. deliberative
   used to exhort or to dissuade; to create action

2. demonstrative
   used to praise or to blame; to interpret

3. judicial
   used to indict or to defend; to judge
“Models of style: the telegram, the epitaph, the swearword.
“Think of it like this: What will be lost if you don’t answer your question? How will not answering it keep us from understanding something else better than we do? Start by asking So what? at first of yourself” (p. 45).

1. Name your topic

   I am thinking about __________

2. Add an indirect question

   because I want to find out ______________

3. Motivate your question

   so I can help my readers understand ______________