

# Topic, Angle, Purpose

Imagine that one of your professors has given you a new writing assignment. What should you do first? Of course, you should read the assignment closely. Take a deep breath. Then ask yourself a few specific questions about what you are being asked to do:

*What am I being asked to write about? (Topic)*

*What is new or has changed recently about this topic? (Angle)*

*What exactly is the assignment asking me to do or accomplish? (Purpose)*

*Who will read this document and what do they expect? (Readers)*

*Where and when will they be reading this document? (Context)*

These kinds of questions are also helpful in the workplace. When you are writing something for a client or your supervisor, you can use these five questions to help you figure out what you need to accomplish.

These questions are the basic elements of what we will be calling the “rhetorical situation” throughout this book (Figure 2.1). Before you start writing any text, you should first gain an understanding of your rhetorical situation: topic, angle, purpose, readers, and context. In this chapter, we will discuss the first three of these elements. Then, in Chapter 3, “Readers, Contexts, and Rhetorical Situations,” we will discuss techniques and strategies for profiling your readers and anticipating the contexts in which they will experience your document.

Gaining a clear understanding of your topic, angle, and purpose will help you decide which genre is most appropriate for your writing project.



**FIGURE 2.1** Five Elements of the Rhetorical Situation

*Before you start writing, consider these five elements of the rhetorical situation, which will help you get started on your work.*

## Topic: What Am I Writing About?

In college, either the topics for your papers will be assigned or you will be asked to come up with your own topics to write about. When your professor supplies the topic, he or she might say something like this:

For this paper, I want you to write about the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.

Shakespeare’s *King Lear* is often held up as a masterpiece of Renaissance tragedy. We will explore why this play is still popular today.

Our next subject will be “mating and dating” in college, and we will be using our own campus for field research.

If your professor does not supply a topic, you will need to decide for yourself what you are writing about. In these cases, you should pick a topic that intrigues you and one about which you have something interesting to say.

In the workplace, the topics of your documents will be different than the ones you wrote about in college, but you should still begin by identifying clearly what you are writing about. A client or your supervisor may request a written document from you in the following way:

Our organization is interested in receiving a proposal that shows how we can lower our energy costs with sustainable energy sources, especially wind and solar.

Please write a report that explains the sociological causes behind the sudden rise in violence in our city’s south side neighborhoods.

Evaluate these three road surfaces to determine which one would be best for repaving 2nd Street in the downtown area.

Once you have clearly identified your topic, you should explore its boundaries or scope, trying to figure out what is “inside” your topic and what is “outside” the topic. A good way to determine the boundaries of your topic is to create a concept map like the one shown in Figure 2.2.

To make a concept map, start out by writing your topic in the middle of your computer screen or a sheet of paper. Circle it, and then write down everything connected with it that comes to mind. For example, let’s say your sociology professor wants you to write about the romantic relationships of college students. Put “dating and mating in college” in the middle of a sheet of paper and circle it. Then start mapping around that topic, as shown in Figure 2.2.

Write down all the things you already know about your topic. Then, as you begin to run out of ideas, go online and enter some of the words from your map into a search engine like *Google*, *Yahoo!*, or *Ask.com*. The search engine will bring up links to numerous other ideas and sources of information about your topic. Read through these sources and add more ideas to your concept map.

As your map fills out, you might ask yourself whether the topic is too large for the amount of time you have available. If so, pick the most interesting ideas from your map and create a second concept map around them alone. This second map will often help you narrow your topic to something you can handle.



**FIGURE 2.2** Creating a Concept Map About Your Topic

A concept map is a helpful way to get your ideas onto the screen or a piece of paper.

## Angle: What Is New About the Topic?

Completely new topics are rare. On just about every issue, someone has said something about it already. That’s fine. You don’t need to discover a completely new topic for your writing project. Instead, you need to come up with a new *angle* on a topic. Your angle is your unique perspective or view on the issue.

One way to come up with your angle is to ask yourself, “What has changed recently about this topic that makes it especially interesting right now?” For example, let’s say you are searching the Internet for articles about college dating trends. You find a 2001 report from the Institute for American Values called “Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right: College Women on Dating and Mating Today” (Figure 2.3). The report is getting a little out of date, but you mostly agree with the sociologists who wrote it, especially the part about college students wanting marriage but shying away from commitment.

Your experiences as a college student, however, give you some additional insights or “angles” into this topic. Plus, times have changed a little since the report came out. You believe that the hooking-up culture has been replaced by a culture of “serial monogamy” in which many college students now go through a series of short-term emotional and physical relationships while they are in college. These so-called monogamous relationships may last a few months or perhaps a year, but most people don’t expect them to lead to marriage. That’s your angle.

You decide to do a little freewriting to see if your angle works. Freewriting involves opening a new page in your word processor and writing anything that comes to mind for about five minutes (Figure 2.4, page 16). When freewriting, don’t stop to correct or revise. Just keep writing anything that comes into your head.

Dating and mating in college is a very large topic—too large for a five- to ten-page paper. But if you write a paper that explores a specific angle (e.g., the shift from a hooking-up culture to a culture of serial monogamous relationships) you can say something really interesting about how people date and mate in college.

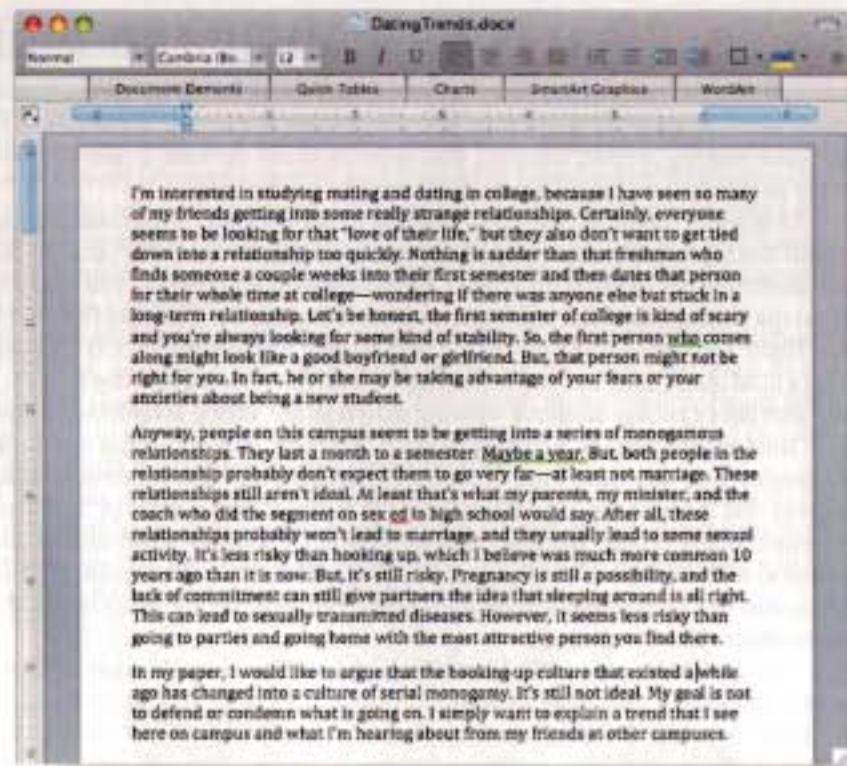


**FIGURE 2.3** A Report on Your Topic

This report, published in 2001, looks like a great source for information on your topic, but it’s growing a little dated. Your own experiences as a college student today may give you some new ways to see the topic.

**FIGURE 2.4**  
Freewriting to Find  
Your Angle

Freewriting about your topic helps you test your new angle. Just write freely for five to ten minutes without making revisions or corrections.



## Purpose: What Should I Accomplish?

Your purpose is what you want to accomplish—that is, what you want to explain or prove to your readers. To this point, figuring out your topic and angle has helped you determine *what* you are writing about. Now, you need to clearly state your purpose—*why* you are writing.

Your professor may have already identified a purpose for your paper in the assignment sheet, so check there first. Assignments based on the topics given on page 13 might look like this:

Your objective in this paper is to show how Martin Luther King's use of non-violence changed the dynamics of racial conflict in the 1960s, undermining the presumption of white dominance among blacks and whites.

In your paper, show how Shakespeare's *King Lear* is similar to and different from his other tragedies. Then discuss why the themes in *Lear* still resonate with today's audiences.

I want you to use close observation of students on our campus to support or debunk some of the common assumptions about dating and mating in college.

If you need to come up with your own purpose for the paper, ask yourself what you believe and what you would like to prove about your topic. For example, at the end of the freewrite in Figure 2.4, a purpose statement is starting to form:

In my paper, I would like to argue that the hooking-up culture that existed a decade ago has changed into a culture of serial monogamy. It's still not ideal. My goal is not to defend or condemn what is going on. I simply want to explain a trend that I see here on campus and what I'm hearing about from my friends at other campuses.

This statement is still a bit rough and it lacks a clear focus, but the purpose of the project is starting to take shape.

In some situations, your purpose statement could also be called your "thesis statement." In this book, we use the term "purpose statement," because we want you to remember that this statement ultimately expresses what you believe or what you are trying to prove. Your purpose statement also defines what genre you are likely to follow. For example, the word "argue" in the rough purpose statement above signals that the author will likely be writing a position paper, a commentary, or a research report. It helps to remember that documents in college and in the workplace tend to be written for two primary reasons: to *inform* and to *persuade*. So your purpose statement will usually be built around some of the verbs shown in Figure 2.5.

You can consult this list of verbs if you are having trouble coming up with your purpose statement. Start by determining whether you are trying to *inform* your readers or trying to *persuade* them. Then pick the key word that best describes what you are trying to accomplish.

### Informative Papers

to inform

to describe

to define

to review

to notify

to instruct

to advise

to announce

to explain

to demonstrate

to illustrate

### Persuasive Papers

to persuade

to convince

to influence

to argue

to recommend

to change

to advocate

to urge

to defend

to justify

to support

**FIGURE 2.5**  
Common Verbs  
Used in  
Purpose  
Statements

## Choosing the Appropriate Genre

Once you have sketched out your topic, angle, and purpose, you can choose which genre would be appropriate for your project. The appropriate genre depends on what you are trying to do and who you are writing for. Perhaps your professor has already identified the genre by asking you to write a “report,” a “literary analysis,” or a “proposal.” If so, you can turn to that chapter in this book to learn about the expectations for that genre (Chapters 4–13).

If you are allowed to choose your own genre, or if you are writing something on your own, the best way to figure out which genre would work best is to look closely at your purpose statement. Keep in mind, though, that genres are not formulas or recipes to be followed mechanically. Instead, each one reflects how people in various communities and cultures do things with words and images. They are places where people make meaning together. Figure 2.6 shows how your purpose statement can help you figure out which genre is most appropriate for your writing situation.

The genre that fits your purpose statement will help you make strategic decisions about how you are going to invent the content of your document, organize it, develop an appropriate style, and design it for your readers.

**FIGURE 2.6**  
Identifying the  
Appropriate  
Genre

My Purpose	The Appropriate Genre
“I want to write about the meaning of something I experienced in my life.”	Memoir (Chapter 4)
“I want to describe someone else.”	Profile (Chapter 5)
“I need to critique something I saw, experienced, or read.”	Review (Chapter 6)
“I want to show why someone or something does or does not demonstrate high quality.”	Evaluation (Chapter 7)
“I need to explain and interpret a work of literature or art.”	Literary Analysis (Chapter 8)
“I need to explain why a text or speech was effective or persuasive, or not.”	Rhetorical Analysis (Chapter 9)
“I want to express my opinion about the people and events around me.”	Commentary (Chapter 10)
“I want to argue for my beliefs or opinions.”	Position Paper (Chapter 11)
“I want to propose a solution to a problem.”	Proposal (Chapter 12)
“I need to explain an issue by doing research about it.”	Report (Chapter 13)

Ready to start right now? Here are some techniques and strategies for identifying your topic, angle, and purpose.

### IDENTIFY Your Topic

Your topic will be assigned by your professor or you will need to come up with it yourself. Either way, figure out what interests you about the topic. Then use a concept map to determine what issues are related to your topic.

### NARROW Your Topic

Ask yourself whether the topic is too large for the amount of time you have available. If it might be too large, pick the most interesting ideas from your map and create a second concept map around them. This second map should help you narrow your topic to something you can handle.

### DEVELOP Your Angle

Your angle is your unique perspective on the topic. A good way to develop an angle is to ask yourself, “What has changed recently about this topic that makes it especially interesting right now?” You might also ask what unique perspective you could offer on this issue.

### WRITE Down Your Purpose

Your purpose is what you want to accomplish—that is, what you want to explain or prove to your readers. Decide whether you are *informing* your readers or *persuading* them. Then write a purpose statement that says exactly what you are going to do. The verbs shown in Figure 2.5 might help.

### CHOOSE the Appropriate Genre

The best way to figure out which genre would work best for your project is to look closely at your purpose statement. The chart in Figure 2.6 will help you decide which genre would work for the document you want to write. In some cases, your professor will tell you which genre to use.

## Talk About This



1. With a small group, list some topics that people often discuss and argue about. For example, what do people talk about on television or the radio? What do they argue about at local gathering places like cafés, restaurants, or bars? What are some things people discuss with their friends or families? With your group, come up with ten things that you yourselves have discussed or argued about over the last few days.
2. Take a look at today's news on Web sites like *CNN.com*, *FoxNews.com*, or *MSNBC.com*. What are some of the topics in the news today? You will notice that totally new topics aren't all that common. However, there are new angles developing all the time. With your group, discuss the new angles you notice on these topics. How do the reporters come up with these new angles? What has changed recently to create some of these new angles?

## Try This Out

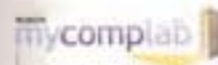


1. List five topics that you might be interested in writing about this semester. They can include anything that captures your imagination. Then, for each of these topics, ask yourself, "What is new or has changed recently about this topic?" Using your answers to this question, write down two possible angles for each topic.
2. Think of a topic that catches your interest. For five minutes, create a concept map that includes everything you can think of about this topic. Now, look at your concept map and find a part of this topic that you would like to explore further. Then freewrite on that part for five more minutes and see what kinds of ideas begin to emerge. Would this "narrower" topic be easier to write about than the topic you started with?
3. Pick a topic and angle that interests you and develop a purpose statement for a paper about that topic. Your purpose statement doesn't need to be perfect right now, but try to describe what you want to achieve in your paper. Do you want to inform your readers about your topic or do you want to persuade them? Now, build your purpose statement around one of the words shown in the chart in Figure 2.5.
4. Using the topic and purpose statement from the exercise above, identify which genre would be most appropriate for writing about this topic. Figure 2.6 provides a chart that shows how to use your purpose statement to figure out which genre you should use. Once you've determined which genre to use, flip to that chapter in Part 2, "Using Genres to Express Ideas," to see what that genre usually involves.

## Write This



1. **Identify a topic, angle, and purpose.** Choose a writing assignment from one of your professors. Using the steps and concepts discussed in this chapter, determine the topic you are being asked to write about and come up with a unique angle on it. Then draft a purpose statement for your assignment. Write an e-mail to your professor in which you identify the topic, angle, and purpose of the paper you will be writing. Then discuss which genre would be appropriate for this assignment and why.
2. **E-mail your professor about a new angle on a topic.** Pick any topic that interests you and find a new angle on that topic. Use concept mapping to explore and narrow your topic. Then write a rough purpose statement that shows what you want to achieve in your paper.  
Using the chart in Figure 2.6, choose a genre that would help you to say something meaningful and interesting about this issue. Turn to the chapter in Part 2 that discusses the genre you chose. Using the diagram that appears early in the chapter, sketch a brief outline on this topic.  
Finally, write an e-mail to your professor in which you explain how you would go about writing an argument on this topic. Explain your topic, angle, purpose, readers, and the genre you would use. Tell your professor why you think your approach to the topic would be effective for your readers.



For additional reading, writing, and research resources, go to [www.mycomplab.com](http://www.mycomplab.com).