

## FORMULATING A TOPIC, THESIS, AND SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS

by Prof. Gord Sellar, 2009

### 1. Choosing a Topic

Choosing a topic is the first step in creating an excellent presentation. You need to be careful to choose a topic that is acceptable, because some topics are not acceptable. Please see the "Dead Topics List" included in this booklet/pamphlet for examples of topics that are not acceptable.

You want to choose a topic that is:

- **interesting** -- not boring!
- **unique** -- not a common topic often discussed in presentations.
- **researchable** -- something you can do research about, and study.
- **not too broad** -- talking about "slavery" is very, very broad. Slavery where? When? In what context?
- **not too difficult** -- while "the transformations of gender roles among Islamic immigrant women in London during the 1970s" is a very interesting topic, it's probably something you should save until graduate school.

While it is good to have a topic that is "topical" -- one which seems timely because of current events -- it's also risky if you're not creative enough with your topic. In the wake of a few sex-crime scandals in Korea during 2009/2010, many students proposed presentations on the topics of comparisons between laws about sex crimes in Korea and the USA. Soon, there were too many proposals on this topic, especially with the narrow and somewhat illogical focus on the USA's handling of sex crimes (since arguably the USA could improve in many ways in this area).

A good alternative is to think of something you have studied in some of your classes, and to choose something that fascinated you from one or another class. Perhaps you studied about dialect in a linguistics course: why not present on differences in dialects between regions of an English-speaking country, or the effect of mass media on the erosion of dialects? Perhaps you studied about some element of popular culture from the English-speaking world -- say, a theme common to American TV but not to Korean TV. Or maybe you took a class on media and wanted to know more about the politics of international film distribution. Whatever *interested* you in your classes is likely to make a great topic for a presentation.

Some interesting topics might be:

- Differences in the use of narrative genre in Korean and British prime time television programs.
- The role that race plays in the popularization of Western hip-hop musicians in Korea.
- The effect of the American Prohibition (of alcohol) on modern Western attitudes towards alcohol consumption.
- The dangers of using foreign entertainment media uncritically as a way of "studying culture."
- The role of local dialect in community identity in Britain.

Bear in mind -- you are not necessarily limited to speaking about America, or about "English-speaking" societies. A discussion of the reception of English as a global (or scholarly) language in another society where most people aren't native speakers of English, or of how social issues pertinent to Korea have been handled in non-English-speaking countries, could be acceptable as well. Whether it's traffic laws in the Netherlands, the general educational system in Brazil, or something else, these topics aren't necessarily off-limits. Don't be afraid to go beyond the USA for comparisons, ideas, and topics!

But in all cases, it might be a good idea to run this topic past one or more of the professors you're studying with, informally. You can find out if they have any ideas, or think it's an appropriate topic for a presentation for the speech contest. Don't be too shy to say, "I'm just thinking of topics right now," and note that you haven't got a thesis yet. But don't be surprised if your professor says it might be okay, as long as you have a good thesis and arguments. It's a good idea to have a few topic ideas ready before you seek your professors' reaction.

When you have a topic, you need to make a thesis, but first, you need to know more about your topic than you think you do. So it's time to start researching.

## **2. Research Guidelines**

Some students seem to believe that research is a process by which they hunt for quotations that support their argument. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Research serves many purposes:

- to help you learn about your subject, and eliminate your own assumptions or misconceptions about it
- to make you aware of the opinions of experts on your subject
- to help you form your own opinions based on evidence and facts, as well as the opinions of experts

Experts aren't always right. In fact, many times in history, experts have turned out to be wrong about things. So you don't necessarily need to agree with what experts say. However, you also shouldn't ignore them: they're experts not because they're perfect, but because they know a lot more than most people about a subject. If you disagree with them, you need to have a good reason for doing so.

Visiting Wikipedia or another website is not research. Wikipedia **can** be useful for helping you to develop a basic understanding, or to help you find out which experts you should be consulting for your research -- so always look at the information sources in the footnotes for any Wikipedia article you read. But just visiting Wikipedia itself is not really research at all.

Any well-researched presentation should involve at least a couple of trips to the library. The best sources for your research will often be articles in journals, or books by experts on your topic.

No source is perfectly reliable. But articles in peer-reviewed journals and books by respected experts are a much better source than TV documentaries, random websites, or magazine and newspaper articles. Research that consists of watching a TV documentary is insufficient research. You should at least be making a few trips to the library to find out more about your subject. And if you cannot find a scholarly article on your topic, try using Google Scholar (<http://scholar.google.com/>) to search for more articles about your topic. You can take the publication information for the articles you find to the library and ask a research librarian for help, or perhaps download articles that aren't available from our library by visiting another university library or having a friend at another university with wider database access to download the articles for you.

In the case where you cannot find reference sources, the best thing to do is one or all of the following:

1. Try to interview an expert in the field, if possible.
2. Attempt to perform some research of your own, perhaps in the form of an informal survey of classmates, or online.
3. Talk to a research librarian at our library, who can help you find useful sources.
4. Talk to a professor who might have some idea of where you might be able to find some useful sources.

Carefully keep track of your research sources. You will need to give citations during/after your presentation in order to avoid plagiarism.

### **3. Formulating a Strong Thesis**

Your thesis is the most important part of your presentation. You need to have a strong, clear thesis, or your presentation will have no purpose or point.

Simply put, the thesis is the answer to a question.

**A THESIS IS NOT A QUESTION! It is the ANSWER to a question.**

For example, if your topic is:

The popularity of white and black jazz musicians in Korean popular culture.

Then what you are going to talk about is the following:

White jazz musicians are more popular than black jazz musicians in Korean popular culture.

At this stage, you have stated a fact or opinion about the world. (Your research will ensure that you have some support for this opinion.)

Next, you need to ask yourself, "So what?"

Actually, you need to ask yourself:

**SO WHAT?!?!?**

Why is this important? Why is this worth talking about? Obviously, the popularity of musicians of one race, or another, may be caused by all kinds of things. It may tell us about history, culture, attitudes, distribution and availability of media, and so on.

With this in mind, you can easily ask yourself a question like this:

Why are the most popularly famous American jazz artists in Korea usually white musicians?

This still isn't a thesis, it's just a question.

**A QUESTION IS NOT A THESIS: THE THESIS IS YOUR ANSWER (SUPPORTED BY EVIDENCE) TO THE QUESTION YOU ASK.**

You can turn your question into a thesis by answering it.

The most important jazz artists in America have often been African-American, but in Korea the most widely-known and popular American jazz musician are white Americans. Why is this the case?

This is just a step, since you still haven't answered the question. You can also add some supporting details to the question, like this:

The most important jazz artists in America have often been African-American, but in Korea the most widely-known and popular American jazz musician are white Americans like Bill Evans, Pat Metheny, and Chet Baker. Why is this the case?

Now you're ready to try answer the question, based on your research:

The most important jazz artists in America have often been African-American, but in Korea the most widely-known and popular American jazz musician are white Americans like Bill Evans, Pat Metheny, and Chet Baker. There are three reasons for this: how jazz music was promoted to Koreans historically, traditional Korean attitudes towards race, and the appeal to Koreans of conservative or traditionalist styles of jazz more often played by white musicians today.

With a thesis paragraph like this, you're ready to work on the rest of your presentation.

What is the thesis?

The most important jazz artists in America have often been African-American, but in Korea the most widely-known and popular American jazz musician are white Americans like Bill Evans, Pat Metheny, and Chet Baker.

Or, more simply,

"The most important jazz artists in America have often been African-American, but in Korea the most widely-known and popular American jazz musician are white Americans..."

What are the supporting arguments?

"There are three reasons for this: how jazz music was promoted to Koreans historically, traditional Korean attitudes towards race, and the appeal to Koreans of conservative or traditionalist styles of jazz more often played by white musicians today."

The thesis + supporting arguments together (in short form) = **A STRONG THESIS.**

When you have your thesis and basic supporting arguments developed, this is also a really great time to approach a professor and get some feedback about whether your thesis and arguments look like they're going to work. Your professor can point out to you any possible holes in your argument or illogical assumptions, point out where you might need more research, and can help you to narrow or broaden your thesis when necessary.

At this point, you won't feel terrible if some big problem is discovered, because you have ideas, have information, and have a thesis, but you haven't spent hours and hours writing a speech.

#### **4. Building Your Argument**

From here, your presentation really just needs to do three things: give necessary information, explain your arguments, and conclude.

##### **Giving Necessary Background Information**

Do you think your audience knows much about American jazz music? You don't need to give a history of jazz, but it might be useful to let people know any information they will need to understand your presentation.

For example, showing pictures of two jazz musicians like Bill Evans (a white American) and Thelonious Monk (an African-American) will help your audience to recognize their racial differences, which is important to the presentation. You might play a (very!) short clip of each of their music as well, since this is important to your argument later on. Note: I would save the clip until you're explaining argument #3, and I would keep the clip short -- no more than 5-10 seconds.

##### **Explaining Your Arguments**

You have three reasons to explore and explain:

1. how jazz music was promoted to Koreans historically
2. traditional Korean attitudes toward race (especially towards people of African ancestry)
3. the appeal to Koreans of conservative styles of jazz more often played by white musicians today

The rest of your presentation will simply be you explaining your three reasons clearly, giving examples and evidence.

**Examples** help the audience to understand what you're talking about. For example, mentioning the popularity of Bill Evans (a white jazz musician) compared to Thelonious Monk (an African-American jazz musician) is better than just speaking vaguely about "white" and "black" jazz musicians. Specifically comparing Bill Evans' music to Thelonious Monk's music could be very useful for supporting Argument #3 above, for example.

**Evidence** is what you use to show that your argument is true, correct, or reasonable. For example, if you can find information on the sales of CDs by white jazz musicians and black jazz musicians in Korea, it would be useful evidence. Another piece of evidence could be comparing how many copies of CDs different music shops carry of Monk's and Evans' music. A third example could be looking at how many

times Korean jazz fans mention Bill Evans compared to Thelonious Monk. (Search both names in Hangeul on Google will give you approximate hit counts, an interesting -- though imperfect -- way to track popularity.)

You need both evidence and examples to make your argument clear to your audience. Statistics, graphs, (short!) music or video clips, or whatever other evidence you have should be presented in a way that makes it easy for your audience to quickly understand your point.

The question to ask yourself about evidence -- quotations, statistics, and so on -- is: DOES THIS SUPPORT MY ARGUMENT? If it doesn't, either there's a problem with your argument (it's wrong) or the evidence is not needed.

Some strong advice: you should make a strong effort to ensure that each of your supporting arguments draws upon at least one reputable research source. This way, you can be sure that each argument is not only personal opinion, but also at least somewhat supported by evidence.

### **Concluding Your Argument**

When your paper is almost finished, you want to remind people of your main point. What is it that you want people to remember? You want them to remember your thesis, and your basic arguments. If they remember that, and your arguments are well-supported, then your presentation will almost be a success. However, you should also consider whether there's a "so what" problem here.

SO WHAT if the most famous American jazz musicians in Korea are white Americans? Obviously, it must be important for some reason, or you wouldn't have talked about it for ten minutes. You didn't waste everyone's time, did you? So feel free at the end of your presentation to talk about whether this is, for you, a problem, a good thing, what we should do about it, what lesson we can learn from it, or something like that. For example, you might end your speech with something like this:

By focusing on white jazz musicians, many Koreans are missing out on a lot of the most interesting and important artists in American music history, because jazz is an art form that was importantly developed by African-Americans. These musicians should be promoted, respected, and popularized in Korea. To whatever degree this also applies to other elements of popular culture, it is unfortunate that our focus on white, mainstream American entertainment media not only gives us a distorted perception of race in America, as well as profoundly affecting the ways in which we as Koreans interface with American (and global) popular culture.

That's basically it for developing a presentation... and, in fact, this is also a great procedure for writing an essay, report, or article.

## 5. CITATION AND AVOIDING PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism -- using someone else's words as if they are your own -- is a serious offense, and you will not pass the Presentation Contest if you are caught plagiarizing. We have enclosed a document about plagiarism for you to read and think about.

The good news is, it is easy to avoid plagiarism. Here are some things you can do to make sure this doesn't become a problem for you.

1. If you copy words exactly, tell us who wrote them, and give us a little introduction and explanation before and after that show WHY you are quoting the source you are. A common formula is as follows:

In **SOURCE TITLE**, **SOURCE AUTHOR** argues that **SUMMARY OF SOURCE ARGUMENT**. **She/He** writes: "**QUOTATION**." (Citation.) **SOURCE AUTHOR** is arguing that **YOUR EXPLANATION OF ARGUMENT**.

Here's an example:

In Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book, Gerard Jones argues that popular culture became so important in America because of changes in American society. He writes that in the 1920s, in "an increasingly mobile and fluid society, Americans no longer wanted to be identified by class, ethnicity, or region. But to be a Cadillac driver or a Valentino worshipper or a science fiction reader gave a sense of self and community, especially to young people trying to draw black-ink borders around themselves in a world of runaway change" (36). Jones is arguing that popular culture was used to form identity in a new way, instead of forming identity based on class, race, and regional background in the old-fashioned traditional way.

Three notes on the above:

1. The (Citation) is use is in MLA style of citation, using a page number in brackets when the author and book title are clear in the text. You don't need to use MLA -- you can use a footnote or some other method. In any case, this is more important if you are writing an essay than if you are just giving a speech. Don't read the page numbers out loud to your audience!

2. The quotation marks in your speech should be read aloud. You start the quotation by saying, "Quote," and end it by saying, "Unquote." Sometimes it's helpful to include your quotation, or the most important part of it, on your powerpoint, to show exactly what is being quoted. If you use quotation marks, it will be clear you are



quoting someone else's words, which is the best way to avoid plagiarism.

3. In fact, the quotation above is a long-quote. Any quote in an essay that is more than three lines long should be formatted by indenting, without quotation marks, like this:

In Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book, Gerard Jones argues that popular culture became so important in America because of changes in American society. He writes that in the 1920s, in

an increasingly mobile and fluid society, Americans no longer wanted to be identified by class, ethnicity, or region. But to be a Cadillac driver or a Valentino worshipper or a science fiction reader gave a sense of self and community, especially to young people trying to draw black-ink borders around themselves in a world of runaway change. (36)

Jones is arguing that popular culture was used to form identity in a new way, instead of forming identity based on class, race, and regional background in the old-fashioned traditional way.

But this is really not important for a presentation, and if you're quoting a long quote on a Powerpoint slideshow, it's a good idea to include quotation marks just to be clear. Indenting long quotes is only a concern when you're writing an essay, though you should follow this style of formatting in the essay that you write up to accompany your presentation.