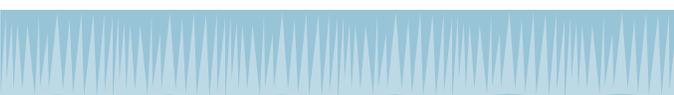


A GUIDE TO FACILITATING ACTION RESEARCH FOR YOUTH



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This Guide grew out of a semester-long workshop done with Youth United for Change (YUC) in Philadelphia in 2003. Thank you to the YUC students and staff for their participation and involvement.

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RESEARCH for ACTION (RFA) is a non-profit organization engaged in education research and evaluation. Founded in 1992, RFA works with educators, students, parents, and community members to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for all students. RFA work falls along a continuum of highly participatory research and evaluation to more traditional policy studies.

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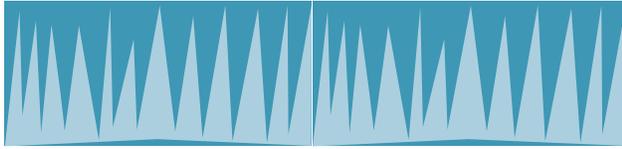
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OAKLAND STUDENTS USE ACTION RESEARCH TO BUILD STUDENT LEADERSHIP



What is “action research” and how is it relevant to urban youth activists? The following story shows how high school students in Oakland, CA public schools, carried out an extensive and very productive action research project as part of their campaign to lower the dropout rate and increase student engagement and power.

In this narrative, you will see how the students handled each of the stages of an action research project: *defining the issues, deciding whom to ask and what kind of research instrument(s) to use, formulating questions, collecting data, analyzing the data* to figure out what’s been learned, *developing conclusions and recommendations*, and *presenting the work*. These are the same steps covered by this Guide.



Background

In 2002 students in Oakland were understandably upset. Since 1995, a group calling themselves *Kids First* had been working to build youth leadership and transform their schools through advocacy, alliance building, creative arts, and leadership training. They knew their schools were overcrowded, physically decrepit, poorly supplied, and there weren't enough qualified teachers. Too many students were dropping out. *Kids First* had experienced some success in their schools and they were building more support. But then the *East Bay Express* newspaper challenged their commitment with a cover story citing student apathy in school. After reading the story, the high school student members of *Kids First* were indignant. Had no one seen them working hard to build community in their schools? They formed a group which they called *REAL HARD* (Representing Educated Active Leaders—Having A Righteous Dream) with the goal of decreasing the dropout rate in their schools and making student engagement more visible and effective.

At this time the state and city governments were threatening to remove all local control from the Oakland schools. *REAL HARD* youth recognized that it was important that students make an extra effort to ensure that their voices were heard.

Defining the issues

REAL HARD members wanted to know more about what could be done to help their fellow students care more about their schools. In their discussions they determined that simply having smaller class sizes or even smaller schools was not going to be enough. Rather, they argued that they needed to empower a broader base of students. To do so, they would need to know more about how large numbers of students felt about many aspects of their schools.

Designing the research/formulating the research questions

These students decided to create a student report card survey which they would use to gather feedback from 1000 students in 3 high schools on the conditions at their school. *REAL HARD* members would assess student perspectives about every aspect of school from student-teacher relationships to safety, from facilities to curriculum to counselors on the report card.

Collecting data

Once they had designed their report card survey questions, *REAL HARD* youth leaders spent 3 months making classroom and individual presentations during and after school and collected nearly 1,000 report card surveys. They also held monthly meetings where other students could complete the report card surveys and provide additional feedback on the conditions of Oakland schools.

Analyzing the data and developing recommendations

After they had collected all of the report card survey cards, the *REAL HARD* students entered all of the data into Excel spreadsheets. In addition, they read through all of the report cards and highlighted the comments that stood out for them. They next held a series of meetings to analyze the results. They then organized student forums over two months to engage a broader group of students in developing and prioritizing recommendations based on the survey data and analysis.

Creating an action plan/sharing the findings

The students prepared a full report of their findings and recommendations, which they made available to the Oakland community and published on their own website. Based on the report, the youth developed and are promoting the first-ever Student Power Resolution, which urges a district policy that will: 1) broaden the scope of action of Student Councils (to include issues like school safety, discipline, teacher quality and curriculum); 2) increase funds, facilities, and support so that Student Councils can turn their ideas into action and policies; 3) ensure that elected student leaders can and will negotiate and represent student concerns to school-based administrators; 4) provide open forums where students can bring up concerns, problems, and ideas for school improvement; and 5) increase the number of leadership classes so that more students can move into leadership positions.

For more information, visit

www.kidsfirstoakland.org

“Research serves to make building stones out of stumbling blocks.”

–Arthur D. Little

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS ACTION RESEARCH?

Action research is a systematic process of inquiry, which involves gathering information about an issue or problem, analyzing the findings, and developing practical plans for affecting positive change. It is motivated by the desire to investigate in order to better understand the root causes of social and political injustices, such as poverty, racism, lack of affordable housing, etc. and to develop action plans to address inequities.

For example, an action research project might begin because students heard complaints about the health of children living near a chemical plant in a local neighborhood. The action research project team might gather information on residents’ experiences and health issues as well as the facts behind the chemicals used at the plant. Further, the research team might try to understand the broader economic and legal reasons for why a chemical plant was leaving its waste products in a low-income neighborhood. Once their research was completed, they might organize a series of actions to educate the local population, elected officials, and company representatives, of the health risks associated with these leftover chemicals. They might create informational pamphlets, organize public hearings, produce a documentary film, or facilitate a governmental and/or legal inquiry.

One distinguishing feature of action research is that all stages of the process, from designing the project to deciding how its findings will be used, are carried out in cooperation with those people who are themselves affected by the situation under investigation.

A key difference between action research and much traditional (academic) research is in the way the findings are used. With conventional research, a project is often considered complete after a report has been written and given to the client. The work may have broader impact if the report is published, the work is presented to an audience, or the findings influence policymaking. With action research, however, change is expected to happen as a result of the research. The goal of action research is to gather new information so that participants can plan actions that will address their concerns and enhance the quality of people’s lives.

HOW IS ACTION RESEARCH USEFUL TO YOUTH ORGANIZING?

Action research can make a valuable contribution to a youth organization by helping to fulfill its mission—whether it is to improve its public schools, increase funding for youth programs, challenge the juvenile justice system, and/or to help individual students to change their lives through enriching, self-affirming experiences. One key belief that action research shares with youth organizing is the idea that people who are most directly affected by a situation (e.g. youth) should be centrally involved in both asking questions about problems and finding answers.

ACTION RESEARCH AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Action research is a valuable tool because of the kind of educational experience it offers students. Action research fits into a philosophy of education known as “experiential learning,” which contrasts in some important ways with the approaches to teaching and learning that have traditionally been used in most American public schools (see below).

Conventional schooling	Experiential learning
Students are presented with established knowledge or ideas and expected to retain the information.	Students learn through engagement in activities which generate new experiences and knowledge.
Authority is centered in the teacher as the classroom expert.	Expertise can be found in different people, depending on the topic and questions.
Evaluation of success focuses on products and outcomes (e.g., test scores, papers, grades) and is carried out by authority figures.	Success is viewed in terms of the process of discovery and participants' experiences, as well as the outcomes. Students participate in evaluating their progress.
Learning is centered in the classroom.	All situations are seen as potential contexts for learning.

In American schools, efforts to structure school lessons around student experiences began in the early 20th century with the work of people like John Dewey, considered one of the fathers of experiential learning. Later in the 1960s, when many teachers were particularly concerned with making their curriculum personally relevant to students, experiential learning again enjoyed a brief period of emphasis. Over the last 10-15 years, with the rise of new models for reforming high schools (whole school reform), national programs such as the Coalition for Essential Schools and Outward Bound Expeditionary Learning Schools have expanded the territory of experiential learning for students. A number of groups who endorse experiential learning and who facilitate working groups of young people have used the following set of three simple questions to organize their processes of gathering information and developing action plans.

WHAT ? SO WHAT? NOW WHAT?

WHAT: What do we want to do? What do we need to know in order to decide on our goals or carry out our plans? What specific questions do we want to ask and of whom? What are the best ways to collect the information we need? These types of question typically get asked at the start of a project.

SO WHAT: So what kinds of information have been collected? So what does the research mean? So what kinds of conclusions can be made from the research? These are ongoing questions in a project.

NOW WHAT: Now what can be done with the knowledge from the research? Now how can what's been learned be applied to the situation? Now what are the next steps to take with the findings? These questions, asked as an undertaking nears its completion, lead back again to the first question, WHAT? What comes next?

This Guide is organized to illustrate how each of these questions can be interpreted in the context of action research.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE: PURPOSE AND CONTENTS

This booklet is designed to guide organizers and other facilitators working with young people as they introduce different skills needed to do successful action research and help students carry out action research projects. The Guide does not, of course, cover every aspect of professional research, but it should provide enough ideas and activities to get leaders and facilitators started.

As leaders try out ideas from this Guide, they should develop their own ideas and strategies. The intention of this Guide is to assist leaders as they gradually develop their own unique approach. It is important to build in periodic reflection time to assess what's been learned, how well certain methods are working, and what might be done differently in the future.

The guide is divided into three sections, representing three major stages in the process of an action research project: "**WHAT?**": choosing a research topic and collecting data; "**SO WHAT?**": analyzing and interpreting the findings; and "**NOW WHAT?**": making use of your study's findings. Within each of these sections are subsections related to steps in the action research process. Each subsection includes descriptions of one or more group activities which facilitators can use with students to help them develop needed skills and carry out their research project. Sections titled "Building Momentum" offer activities students can do on their own to advance their learning.



WHAT

- **What are the important questions to ask?**
- **What is already known about this topic?**
- **What will be the specific focus of this research?**
- **What methods can be used to gather new information?**

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES OR PROBLEMS OF CONCERN?

HOW DO STUDENTS BEGIN TO LOCATE AN ISSUE TO RESEARCH?

Students in youth organizations identify issues that connect deeply to their organization or group's mission and to their own interests, something worthy of their serious inquiry, effort, and creativity. Here are some steps that can help lead students to exciting and useful research projects. A key is for the students to stay open to and reflect on their experiences. Encourage them to take some chances and reach beyond what they think they already know and can take for granted. Also, encourage students to be open-minded about both their subject and the quality of their own work.

Some sources of ideas for topics

- Students' personal experience and the experiences of others they know. Instructions for students might be: "Think about what has happened to you or others that concerns or excites you—that makes you want to ask questions and understand more."
- Background reading can help students become familiar with the definition, history, depth, and complexity of an issue. "What questions have different authors raised about the topic? What questions, ideas and conclusions have their work highlighted?"
- Imagining possibilities for change toward an ideal future. "Think of an action plan: What could you and your fellow students do to bring about your vision? Dare to dream that your action plan will succeed and create an image in your mind, as detailed as you can, of how things would be." This process, called active visioning, is a technique many athletes use to prepare for their performances.
- What makes you angry when you look around your community, school, the world?

A visioning exercise

Activity

Have students pair off. Have one student stand behind and to the side of another. Have the student in front, extend their right arm straight out palm up in a fist. Instruct the other person to gently hold their wrist and their “elbow-pit”. Inform the students that this exercise is about creating a vision and part of the overall vision is that they are respectful of one another’s person/bodies. Inform the students that when you say so, those who are holding on will attempt to bend the other person’s arm and those with their arms out stretched will try to keep their arms straight. Ready? Go. Okay, stop.

DEBRIEF: Ask people what they were thinking. Many will volunteer that they knew they could either bend or be bent. Have a quick go round to get a range of views. Now try it again. This time, gently guide the group on a visualization exercise before they begin. Have them close their eyes. Tell the people with their hands extended that they could imagine that their arms are the branches of a huge tree with a thick trunk and roots that go deep into the ground. Alternatively, tell them to imagine their arms as a steel pipe through which a huge force of water is rushing. Embellish the image and encourage them to keep their eyes closed until they can hold that picture—whichever they choose—in their heads. When they can hold that image in their minds, they should slowly nod their heads and open their eyes. Now ask the others to try to bend the same arms. Ready? Go. Okay, stop.

DEBRIEF: While there may still be some who cannot stop their arms from being bent, others will surprise you with the power of their vision. Some will volunteer that they could not (or would not) keep the picture in their heads. Sometimes the ‘benders’ also keep that picture in their heads.

The point of this activity is that what we hold in our minds tends to become real. Not what we let pass through our minds, but what we actively hold on to and believe is more likely to come to pass. If we believe that we can’t be stopped, guess what? We can’t! If we hold onto that belief we begin to exercise some control over our destinies.

Thanks to my friend, David Burger, for teaching me this activity.

Activity

Building momentum

This is an activity students can do at home, a public library or even on a bus or train. Suggest that students find a place to think and write without much distraction. Ask them to think about what they would like to research. What might they learn about that could help make their high school or community a better place? Ask them to put their ideas in the form of questions. Here are some instructions to share with them:

- Take a moment, without writing, to simply imagine what a final presentation of your project might look like. What form would it take? Would it be a detailed report? A PowerPoint presentation? A poster with photos and graphs and writing?
- Write about what you think you might need to do a good job on this topic. For example, what pieces of information—facts, history, differing opinions—would help you tell a more complete story about your topic?
- What would you need to read about to learn what you need to know?
- Are there particular people or groups of people (experts, community members, students) you think you should interview about the topic? Who might they be?
- Write down at least four questions connected with your area of interest.

Reassure the students that they need not judge their work too harshly. What is important is to have something to start with. They can always add to it or change it. What they think really does matter, and doing this kind of reflective work can help them figure out important next steps.

“America is still very much a work in progress. One of the things that has always distinguished us from other countries is that we’ve never been afraid to challenge our most cherished assumptions. Keep asking questions, both pertinent and impertinent. Remember that your life is nothing more than a series of questions that you yourself have posed. If the questions aren’t robust, engaging or provocative, there isn’t much chance that the answers will be. In this sense you create the conditions for your own success or failure.”

—Gary Trudeau, at Colorado College Commencement, 1997

WHAT ARE THE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK?

In order to succeed in collecting the information students need, it's important to be able to ask an effective question. But how do we know when we have a good question? Here are some characteristics of good questions.

Good questions are

- Appropriate and relevant to a situation, need or concern.
- Meaningful to the success of some work or enterprise.
- Really the ones you want answers to.
- Ones with useful answers.
- Interactive. They encourage collaboration with others in shaping the questions and in figuring out the answers.
- Able to trigger reflection and evoke insight. They make you go deeper into something.

Examples of good questions related to Youth United for Change's small schools campaign

- What are current activities related to our small schools campaign?
- What efforts seem to be working?
- How do we know that they are working?
- What efforts do not seem to be productive?
- What are various people (youth, teachers, administrators, community persons) saying about our proposals for small schools?
- If they are opposed, what do they want instead?
- How will we know when we have persuaded (more?) people to take our ideas of small schools seriously?
- How can we involve key adults in helping us?
- Which adults could contribute to our effort and what do they bring to the table that could be helpful?

Activity

Asking good questions

Divide the students into small groups of 3-4. Give each group a large piece of chart paper. Pick a topic (or ask students to pick one) that is broad enough so everyone in the group can offer some thoughts on it and it is something that might generate some passion as well. Examples might be: violence in schools, promoting student motivation, or effective school leadership.

Now ask the group to divide the paper lengthwise and begin to talk about possible questions associated with the topic. On one half ask them to list the questions they consider "good questions" and on the other half questions that did not seem so good. Give them 10-15 minutes to do this. Then have each group present their papers and say something about how they distinguished the good from the not-so-good. Have someone keep a written record of these criteria to refer to later. This kind of rehearsal and practice will help when the students need to do more of this kind of thinking on their own.

WHAT IS ALREADY KNOWN ABOUT THE TOPIC?

Students need background information about the issue or area of their planned research project. Being well informed will help them choose a focus for their research and ask good questions. You may be able to arrange for a librarian, either at the school or in a public library, to provide an information session for students on how to carry out literature searches, database searches, and use other library research tools.

MAKING SENSE OF DIFFICULT READINGS

In order to build a broad knowledge base, students may need to take on readings which they find quite challenging. The Appendices provide detailed descriptions of three methods that can help students learn to handle difficult reading material:

(See Reading Strategies: *Knowledge Chart*, the *KIM technique*, and *Text Rendering*).

The Goldilocks assignment

Activity

This can be done either as homework, as a web-based search, or as part of a library fieldtrip.

Each student will have a broad topic or subject area. Their task is to find three articles to read about the topic. One article should seem too hard for them to understand, one too basic and simple to be of much use, and one should be “just right.” Their job is not only to find these articles, but also to be prepared to explain why they believe the articles are too hard, too easy, or just right.

In order to help them process their readings, they could:

- Summarize in a few sentences what they think the articles said.
- List several of the main ideas or points of interest they got from the reading.
- List a series of reasons why they felt that the reading was: a) too easy, b) too hard, or c) just right.

The students can then present their reports to one another. This exercise has two main functions: getting students engaged with in-depth background research and also giving them practice in developing and explaining reasoned views for their opinions.

LEARNING TO DO COMPUTER-BASED SEARCHES

There are some cautions about using the Internet and evaluating the reliability of the information you find. Not all websites present accurate, unbiased information. As students become increasingly reliant on the Internet for research, it is important for them to learn to assess the quality of a given site. There are a number of places on-line to learn what to look out for in websites. A great starting place is www.internet_evaluation.htm that has links to many sources including a Canadian organization called the Media Awareness Network, where the questions in the activity below came from. Students can ask these questions to help determine the accuracy and authenticity of information on a particular site. Students might want to cut out this section and paste it onto a separate sheet that they can keep and refer to as needed. Also, in the Appendices at the end of this guidebook is a short list of reliable, informative, and up-to-date on-line resources and references about action research done by youth and readings about educational research.

Activity

Internet scavenger hunt

Students should read three articles and begin to identify areas for further inquiry. After reading a few articles, a computer scavenger hunt can be a fun way for students to become more comfortable with using the Internet and finding new source material they can draw from for their projects.

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to locate all the items on this list. The documented proof can be obtained by printing the various things you have found.

You may accept coaching from one or more of the adults but bear in mind the adults will be eliminated from the hunt if they are doing the work instead of you.

Items that exceed 10 pages of print will not count as acceptable. You may have to scroll through things to see their length before deciding to print them.

For each item, use a highlight pen to mark the date it was written and the Web address it came from.

There will be fabulous prizes for all the contestants, but will vary by what place you finish.

You will have 30 minutes to complete the hunt.

Are you ready? Find the following items:

1. A page from your school's website
2. An editorial from a newspaper about events occurring in schools in the United States
3. An article about your public schools from your city's newspaper(s)
4. A letter to an editor about problems in public schools
5. An article about a "successful" urban high school
6. A research study reporting findings about improving public-schools
7. A chart, graph, or table that depicts some data about high schools
8. Three different readings that relate to your area of interest associated with what makes for "successful urban high schools"

ANALYZING INTERNET SITES

- Who is the author of this page? Is there information on the author or organization?
- Can you link to more in-depth information about the author or organization?
- Is there a real world address?
- Is more than one viewpoint provided? Can you link to alternatives?
- Does it use loaded language or emotion as a method of persuasion?
- Are the topics clearly stated?
- Is it well written and easy to understand?
- Are there links to other in-depth resources? Do the links work?
- Is the copyright of the material on the site provided?
- When was this site created or last updated?

Building momentum

Activity

Each student should have a binder to keep track of all the materials they collect. Ideally, it should have blank pages for writing and pockets or some other way to store articles they collect (maybe a three-ring binder with different sections). Beginning a journal at this point can also help students learn and engage more fully in the project. A journal provides an opportunity for student to respond to the points of view they encounter. It can serve as a record of their growth and change over time—changes in thinking, in beliefs, in the use of various academic and cognitive skills. Sometimes, adults arrange with students to carry on a dialogue in their journal. For instance, adults may want to write feedback to assignments given, ask clarifying questions or make suggestions about how to proceed. In all cases, students' permission should always be obtained first before writing in their journals. When there is a strong level of trust between the adults and students, the journals can have both private and public sections. For additional resources on journal writing see the section in the Appendices entitled "Suggestions on Keeping a Journal."

WHAT WILL BE THE SPECIFIC FOCUS OF THIS RESEARCH?

Once students have decided on the area they want to investigate and have started to build a knowledge base, they need to define a specific focus for their research.

Activity

Developing statements describing the research focus

Have the students write a clear, tight one-or-two paragraph statement (between 25-50 words) explaining what their research will focus on and why. Also, have students practice articulating the same ideas verbally to an interested audience. This exercise will help students prepare to gather data and reflect on the merits of their research focus.

Keep in mind that the project's focus may change as the students get more information, experience, and time for reflection. If it seems, over time, that students are wandering from their focus simply out of restlessness or boredom, they may need to return to the initial question of what can make the project truly worthy of their time.

Activity

Writing a thesis statement

A thesis statement is a one-or-two sentence summary of the basic idea or argument that will be presented in a paper. Almost all formal analytical written works have a thesis statement somewhere near the beginning of the piece. In essence, the job of the thesis statement is to present the author's answers to the questions which will be examined in the paper.

Writing organized and coherent thesis statements is good practice for students who need to produce senior projects and papers. Students doing college-level work will be expected to have this skill. You may decide to have your students work on developing a thesis statement for their project, once the work is completed and they are ready to prepare a presentation. The Appendices include a detailed discussion on writing thesis statements which should help you guide the students in this exercise. You can start this activity in the group session, have the students continue their work at home, and then present their product to the group at the next session.

WHAT METHODS CAN BE USED TO GATHER NEW INFORMATION?

“Do not wait; the time will never be ‘just right.’ Start where you stand, and work with whatever tools you may have at your command, and better tools will be found as you go along.”

–Napoleon Hill

An explanation of “data”

In order to develop well-informed answers to questions, researchers gather “data.” Basically, all data is information. Data can include facts, numbers, descriptions of events or experiences, opinions, etc. People collect data all the time and use the information to help in making decisions. For example, in choosing an outfit to buy, one might see what is available at different stores, compare prices, observe what other people are wearing, etc. The process of gathering this information is called “data collection.”

Data can be divided into two major categories: Quantitative and Qualitative. Quantitative data are numbers; they measure things you can count and represent numerically. Qualitative data measure things that can be observed and described in words. When people think of data, they may most often think of quantitative data such as statistics, but there are many other sources of data, from historical records of events and people, to opinion polls, to observation of the behavior of groups or individuals.

DEVELOPING TOOLS - INSTRUMENTS - FOR RESEARCH

A first stage in the research will be to decide the scope of the investigation. When it comes to researching large questions like, “What makes for effective urban high schools?” students could take a wide view, looking at an extended time period and large geographic area. Alternatively, they could take a close look at one school or even one student’s experience. For an insightful investigation, students could combine a broad view and a more narrowly focused perspective. For example, they could read and evaluate accounts of schools that are reputed to be successful. They could visit schools and observe them first-hand. Students could collect views on school effectiveness from school officials, parents, other students, and government sources. Developing tools for research include asking and answering these types of questions:

What kind of instrument should we use?

The choice of what kind of research tool to use will depend on what you are interested in learning. Some of the common options are surveys, personal interviews, in-depth observations, focus groups, and collection and analysis of formal and informal documents.

If students want to generalize about the values or beliefs of a large group of people, then a survey might be the right research tool. If students want to

describe in detail a particular program and individuals' experiences in it, then observations and interviews might be the way to go. The clearer students can be on what they need to learn the easier it is to determine which instrument(s) can actually gather the relevant data they'll need.

How to know if the survey (or interview questions, or observation guide) designed will work?

Often students will want to use more than one kind of instrument to investigate a particular issue. Drawing from multiple sources strengthens their findings. This process, called "triangulation," is discussed in the section on data analysis.

Keep in mind that as students conduct research on an area and learn more about it, they may realize that they need to ask different questions and revise or change their research instruments.

How to know when enough data has been collected?

It is hard to say when one has "enough" data to start analyzing and forming conclusions. In general, students probably have enough data to work with when they begin to see patterns—the same things repeated in each new set of data. Remember that modest findings are still findings. Researcher Harry Walcott made this point when he said that "you don't need to know everything in order to be able to say something."

DESCRIPTIONS OF DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

Interview

This is usually a set of one-on-one questions to ask. The questions are generally designed with the larger research problem in mind. For example, interview questions often include background information about a person's job, experiences, and history. When students only have a little time to conduct an interview, they should ask all the important questions early on. If time is less of an issue, students may want to help the person get comfortable by asking easy and less probing questions first. It is important to take notes on what the interviewee says. Students should not rely solely on their memory. They may want to tape record the interview but only after they have asked the person's permission.

Focus group

This is similar to an interview but instead of a one-on-one interview it is a group interview of people who might have different views on the questions asked. Having a group of people talk about the same thing can often trigger extra insights and provide depth those individuals might not have on their own. Focus groups work best when they are between four and eight people. If possible, get two people to run the focus group; one person to take notes and another to ask the questions and 'direct the traffic.' It takes some skill and concentration to get all the people to share their experiences and opinions. It is hard to take notes and facilitate the conversations at the same time.



Survey

This is a written set of questions that is given to a larger number of people to learn their views across a number of issues and topics. Surveys can be conducted as interviews where the research both asks the questions and fills out the answers for the interviewee. Alternatively, surveys can be handed out and people are then 'trusted' to return them—at the end of a class period, the end of the day, or even drop them off or mail them to a particular locale. Generally speaking, the longer the time is between when surveys are distributed and collected, the fewer the people who will return them. Researchers who rely on interviewees to return surveys on their own will have to think carefully and creatively about how to make it as easy as possible (e.g. self-addressed, stamped return envelopes, collections by hand, raffle prizes for returns by a certain date). There are many resources both on-line and in libraries on how to write good surveys. See: www.unf.edu/dept/fie/sdfs/research/surv_design102.ppt for a good PowerPoint slide show of survey design tips.

Observation

Qualitative researchers who are interested in the culture and behaviors of individuals and groups use observations as a form of data. They attend special or everyday events and take notes on what takes place. Examples of observations might include questions such as: what are people talking about? What are the main points or issues under discussion? Who said what to whom? How did people act towards one another? While observing activities and events, researchers try to keep in mind their larger research interests and questions and not get totally swept up in the here and now. Below is an activity to give students some practice in observation techniques.

Document collection

Individuals and groups produce written records of the ideas, beliefs and policies on different topics. Collecting and then analyzing the content of these documents can help to better understand an organization, a particular effort to do something or an action taken. Sometimes the documents are public and freely available, other times you might have to ask for copies of ones that seem important to your research.



Activity

Designing a research instrument

With any research instrument, it is important to test it out before you actually use it for your study. Have students create a first draft of their instrument (e.g., a survey, set of interview questions, etc.) and experiment using it with friends and/or other interested people to see if the instrument actually works to obtain the data they are looking for. They can then revise the instrument before using it in the actual research situation.

Activity

Practicing different research methods

Students should practice the general skills of observation; taking field notes; and conducting structured interviews. Assign students the task of observing some aspect of school or the behavior and/or interactions of a group inside the school. The students should record the details of what happens while they are observing.

For carrying out an observation, researchers often have some pre-established questions in mind which help to structure what they look for. For example, the researcher is interested in how students who are non-native English speakers are treated in school. With that question in mind, he or she might take note of things like: What kinds of questions does the teacher ask students in class? Are there any differences between native and non-native English speakers? If so, what is the difference? What kinds of work are students given to do? Are there any differences in the amount and/or types of work assigned? How do teachers talk with students inside and outside of class? How do teachers talk about non-native English speaking students to other teachers? How do students, both native and non-native English speakers relate to one another? A researcher might follow a non-native English speaking student from class to class observing and taking notes on each class. Alternatively, the researcher might stay in one classroom and observe how a single teacher responds to different classes and different students.

You can find some useful models of observation notes in *Emerson, Spradley, Van Maanen, and Walcott* (See references).

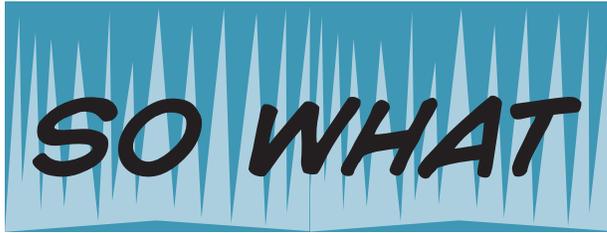
Finding sources of data

Activity

Have the students try to locate three different sources of data that might give them information about the problem, issues and/or questions they are planning to research. Some possibilities include: official records and documents (e.g., a school or district policy); interviews with people involved with the issue; special events or activities during which their issue will be addressed; historical accounts related to their topic (e.g., newspaper accounts.) Have the students take notes on the information they find, summarize their main points, compare them with each other's notes to find similarities and differences. If these data sources point to other places for more data, have the students write down their locations so they can follow up on them later.

When it comes to gathering information, there are some places that are open and data collection is free and easily accessible. There are other places where there are formal channels to follow in order to receive permission to do research. Students should not assume that they have free reign to collect data from anywhere and from anyone. They may need to inquire about how to obtain permission. This is especially true when interviewing minors. When doing research inside schools, students may want to check with the school principal and even the school district (e.g. office of research and testing) to see if there are special procedures they will need to follow before beginning their research.





SO WHAT

- **So what kinds of information have students collected?**
- **So what do the findings from the research mean?**
- **So what kinds of conclusions can be made from the research?**



ANALYZING DATA AND COMING TO CONCLUSIONS

Students should not wait until they have collected all their data to begin analyzing it. Analysis should take place along the way. Doing data analysis early on can help determine whether more data are needed on a certain issue or from a particular group of people. As students collect data, they should look at what they've gathered, see what it means, and whether it is answering the research questions they've posed. Whether the information gathered is quantitative or qualitative, there are a number of steps they need to take in order to analyze the data.

It is very important to teach students how to keep their data and research instruments organized and easily accessible. It will help to have students make copies of all documents; develop a filing system; catalog all the documents and artifacts collected, ideally in a computer file; label and store all the data in a safe place; catalog the instruments—surveys, interview questions, observation sheets, so that they can be used again. Good recordkeeping allows students to see if there are any gaps in the data, and if so try to find it or account for why it is not there.

ORGANIZING DATA

Look over the data a number of times

Looking at the data several times is the first step in the process of analysis. Often a second or third read-through will reveal patterns or unusual findings that weren't seen the first time. Students will probably enjoy this repeated study of the data more if they do it with a partner or small group, rather than alone.

Sort the information

A next step is for student to arrange their data in some ways that seem to make sense. In sorting, the goal is to decide which pieces of information belong together and why. Some examples of ways to organize data include: by the types of questions asked, by the types of answers given, by the types of people who responded, and, for survey questions, by the percentage of people who gave each possible response to a question (e.g. strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). Since people learn in different ways (e.g. visual, auditory, or hands-on), students should consider organizing and showing the data in ways that might appeal to different kinds of learners. For example, they can create a gallery of data on note cards or post-its and then move the pieces around, assembling and reassembling them into patterns. This is an opportunity for students and their leaders to use their creativity.

Start to categorize

This is a form of sorting data into broader groups. Ask students to think about what kinds of categories make the most sense for the questions they are asking and the information they have gathered. Categorizing data can be useful for

making comparisons, as in looking at differences between the responses of teachers and students, or males and females. In other cases, having categories helps break down a large mass of information into more manageable chunks. For example, you can put all the data on school climate into one category and all the data on curriculum into another.

Look for patterns

As students are sorting and categorizing data, they can begin to think about what kinds of patterns are emerging. Think of patterns as the beginning of stories. What story does the data seem to tell? For example, from reading the answers to an open-ended question, one can get an impression that most students seem to feel a certain way about having to wear school uniforms. In another set of responses, community members tend to be as concerned about incidents that happen around the school building as those happening inside it. Finding patterns is a beginning step in drawing conclusions.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

“Triangulate” See how data from different sources support or contradict each other

In the vocabulary of research, triangulation means using two or more different sources (or different types of data) to support a position or assertion. For example, the principal of a school might tell the researcher in an interview that she is concerned about the safety of ninth graders in the hallways. Also, a recent newspaper report details incidences of violence in the school and quotes students expressing their concerns about safety. Here, two different data sources give evidence that the school has problems with student safety. Researchers will not always be able to find triangulation of data, but when they can it makes their conclusions that much more credible.

Make some assertions

Assertions are confident statements of a belief or point of view. Assertions needn't be only large, grand statements, but can also be modest in scope. After students have sorted and categorized their data and looked for patterns, the next step is to figure out what they have learned. To do this, students can ask themselves a number of questions such as:

- What does the research seem to show?
- How does what they found in their research relate to their original
- How can students back up their assertions with their research findings?
- What kinds of evidence do they have to support the claims they want to make?

Analyzing quantitative data

Activity

In order to give students experience in working with quantitative data, you should do an exercise looking at the results of a survey students have administered and collected. As an example, use a survey in which participants responded to statements by indicating one of the following: strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree. Below are a series of steps that the students can take to get some ideas about what they can learn from the survey data.

First, for each statement, determine the percentage of respondents who gave each answer. (Divide the number of people who responded a certain way by the total number of surveys filled out.)

Second, create a “frequency distribution” spreadsheet that shows how responses were distributed across the choices your survey instrument offered. You can use the “Sample Frequency Distribution Spreadsheet” as a model.

Third, if there are several larger categories you can sort the frequency responses into. For example, if the survey collected data about student safety you might have categories such as: a) personal sense of safety during the school day, b) safety going to and from the school, c) bullying, and d) sexual harassment. If your survey has several major questions, you can create multiple spreadsheets, one for each major question.

Fourth, now divide the students into small groups of 2-4 per group and give each group a survey question or two to look at across all of the respondents. They can look at the distribution of percentages and talk about what they see, in order to get some ideas about what kind of story the data tell. Sometimes it can be helpful to combine the strongly agree/agree and strongly disagree/disagree to see the pattern of opinions. Students should not ignore those respondents who say that they don’t know or have no opinion. Those responses provide information also.

Here are a few suggestions for working more closely with data.

- Look at the data literally. What can students say with certainty about the results from their survey? For example, more than two-thirds of the freshmen and sophomores in three schools surveyed said that they did not know who their guidance counselor was. What might that information like that suggest?
- Think about who was surveyed. For example, did students only survey people they knew or only to college-bound students? Do the views collected in the survey represent a wider group or groups? If so, in what ways? Why? If not, why not?
- Are there items that seem to contradict each other? Sometimes questions on a survey (or in an interview) can be misleading and the answers go in odd directions.

- Think outside the box. Don't just go for the first and most convenient explanation. Ask whether there are other ways of looking at the issue. Invite creative thinking.

Fifth, have students create an illustration of their data and the conclusions they reach from the data. Provide each group with some art supplies—large paper, pens, markers, rulers and other materials. They can use words as well as pictures. Students might create maps, diagrams, or more artistic representations of their data and its meaning.

Sixth, have students to record their analyses. Have them create a section in their binders or some other way of saving their different efforts at analysis over time. As they learn more and/or share the data with others, students may find that they'll want to re-visit an earlier idea. It is good to hold onto different versions of analysis of the same data as those analyses may be useful later with increased knowledge or insight.

Activity

Analyzing qualitative data

Qualitative data can be both easier and harder to interpret than quantitative data. It is easier because the data frequently contain people's actual words or descriptions of their actions and that helps make it seem squarely grounded in reality. On the other hand, it is more challenging because the findings are not generalizable, so they can be more subject to varying interpretations. That doesn't make qualitative data less valid or valuable, but it does give the researcher an extra responsibility to provide carefully reasoned views for their interpretations of the data.

The purpose of analyzing qualitative data is to determine what kind of story the data tells about people's experiences, beliefs, thoughts and feelings. Qualitative data can come in the form of interviews, short answers on surveys, focus groups, or a researcher's notes based on observations. Sometimes researchers select quotations that illustrate a condition and/or response to a problem. Researchers look closely at the answers people supplied and see what, if anything, these responses have in common with one another. Sometimes researchers highlight key events or experiences through creating 'vignettes.' Vignettes are literally small stories built from the data that illustrate a larger theme.

Here are five steps students can follow to practice analyzing qualitative data. Students should use the short answers from surveys, interviews, focus group summaries, or other qualitative data they collected:

First, sort the responses by who provided the answer (e.g. students vs. adults; if all students, then sort by grade, gender, age, or other appropriate category).

Second, look for patterns in the answers. Are there certain ideas or themes that stand out? Are there particular issues or ideas noticeably missing in the answers?

Third, discuss in small groups what these patterns in the data might mean. In other words, what assertions can the group make from the evidence in front of them?

Fourth, have each small group report what they discovered to the whole group. Encourage them to use diagrams or other ways of illustrating their points. Expect those who are not presenting to ask questions and push for solid explanations. Sometimes a well-phrased or fresh question can unlock a new insight into the data that escaped the people who are most familiar with the information.

Fifth, think about story-telling. What are the most important ideas and/or points students can see in their data? What are the smaller ones that seem to connect to or support the main points? How can students put them together to tell a story of what happened or what people think or believe is going on? How does this story fit with the research questions that students began with?

Sample Frequency Distribution Spreadsheet					
Statement	To what extent do you agree with the following statements about this school				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
Administrators and department heads demonstrate an openness to learning from staff and students.	18%	26%	19%	18%	19%
Helping students with problems in their learning is treated as a high priority in this school.	1%	18%	45%	35%	1%
Feedback that students receive about their learning helps them improve.	20%	20%	25%	10%	25%
Staff believe that all students are capable of learning.	3%	8%	38%	44%	7%
Students are helped to think about how they learn best.	8%	12%	61%	19%	0%



NOW WHAT

- **Now what can students do with the findings of their research?**
- **Now who should they share their findings with?**
- **Now what is the best way to tell the story of their research?**
- **Now how can they use the research findings to bring positive change in the area they have studied?**
- **Now what are the next steps for students to follow-up on their findings?**

“Built into action research is the proviso that, if as a [student] I am dissatisfied with what is already going on, I will have the confidence and resolution to attempt to change it. I will not be content with the status quo.”

–Jean McNuff

USING FINDINGS TO PROMOTE POSITIVE CHANGE

Once students have conducted research and arrived at some new knowledge and understanding, how can they make use of what they have learned? As youth organizing groups know, action campaigns can take many different forms, and research findings can be used to support different kinds of activist initiatives. In this Guide, the focus is on presenting research findings to various audiences who are likely to find the work interesting and useful. Oral presentations and public conversations are important ways to share findings with those people whom the research was designed to help and those who may want to get involved. Written presentations are also of great value.

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Think about the target audiences

Whether oral or written, a presentation needs to be shaped to the needs and interests of the specific audience. For example, with a written report, a school principal who has been working with students in researching a school problem could use a full report with a lot of detail. Whereas, someone in local government, with less time available, might find a report with short, bulleted points of the findings more useful. Students in schools where the research was conducted might appreciate a dramatic representation or other engaging way of sharing the findings. The same consideration applies for an oral presentation. Sometimes the research will deal with several important issues or produce many interesting findings. In choosing which material to present and/or emphasize, students need to consider both the audience and the amount of time available. Doing a mock presentation, with people playing the roles of critics and audience members can be a helpful preparation.

Organization and neatness matter

In order to earn maximum respect for their work, students should present it in as professional a manner as possible. Written materials should receive careful, thorough proof-reading, so that the spelling, sentence structure and appearance are all high quality. The same is true for public speaking. Students should rehearse presentations in advance, so that they will feel more at ease and assured at the real event.

Share the findings in advance

Before making any public presentations, it is a good idea to share what students have learned with those from whom they collected the data. One of the hallmarks of action research is that the people studied are included in the analysis of data and drawing conclusions from the findings. When students share their data and assertions with the subjects of their study, they can find out whether the portrait they have drawn seems accurate to the people most affected.

Listen carefully to the reactions

Oftentimes, people's reactions to student work, especially from the people they 'researched' will have important insights and interpretations students weren't able to see on their own, especially if they listen carefully to the reactions.

Writing up student findings

Students should try to be clear and concise in presenting the information they have collected and the conclusions they have drawn. Also, strongly encourage students not to wait until the last minute to write up their findings. Sometimes the process of writing will help them to understand the material in new and important ways that weren't apparent before. As stated above, keep the specific audience in mind when deciding on length, format, style, and what points to emphasize.

PREPARING A PRESENTATION

Consider using visual aids

Posters, handouts, and PowerPoint presentations are all examples of visual aids which may strengthen a presentation and help with the understanding complex materials. When students have limited time, a visual aid can allow them to share more information quickly. Especially if audience members will share this work with some other group later on, a visual aid can be an effective tool to help them remember the central points from the students' work.

Visualize the impact of their work

As students prepare for a presentation, encourage them to spend some time envisioning the kind of effect their work and the messages might have on a particular audience.

Use their experiences as audience members

Students can think of presentations they have attended which they liked and those they disliked. What made one good and another not so effective? Analyzing these past experiences can help guide their preparation for presenting their work.

GIVING A PRESENTATION

Be open to the audience

During a presentation, it is important for students to be open to feedback, questions and criticisms from outsiders. Students may need help and encouragement to be open-minded and not defensive about their work. You can encourage



them to welcome other people's critiques as opportunities to grow. When students can maintain a certain amount of grace and openness, they may win over some additional key supporters or at least get critics to listen in a new and respectful way.

Play an active role in the presentation

Students can prepare questions to ask their audience, and even use the questions to invite the audience into a problem-posing and problem-solving dialogue. Students can play the role of leaders and facilitators as well as researchers as they present their findings.

Reflect on the experience

Once the presentations are over, be sure that students take the time to revisit and examine what took place. Have them keep a record of their reflection activities. Reflection allows individuals and groups to learn from experience.

Different ways to promote reflection

Activity

We have mentioned the importance of making room for reflection as a way to add to student learning. Sometimes it helps to have some creative approaches to reflection besides having everyone simply say what's on their minds. Here are a few suggestions facilitators and leaders can use for quick and hopefully fun ways to get groups to think deeper about an experience they've had. Any one of these may generate some additional conversation and reflection.

HEADLINES

Give everyone a strip of newsprint and something to write with and ask them to write a headline that captures their feelings or sense of the particular event, experience, or incident they've just gone through. People hold them up, read them aloud, and think about one another's reactions.

WEB OF APPRECIATION

People sit on chairs in a circle, leaving enough room in the center of a circle. You'll need a ball of string or yarn for this one. Hold onto the end of the string and toss the ball to someone in the circle. State something that they did, or something about them that you appreciated. The receiving person does the same thing to someone new until everyone in the circle has become a part of the web. You could double back if you see fit, until everyone has gone twice or more. The web symbolizes the connectedness the group feels towards one another, the support, trust, love, and/or respect that ties people together. Sit there a moment and just enjoy the web connecting everyone.

Use scissors to eventually cut the string, which also symbolizes that we all must return to our individual lives but that we carry the threads of interconnection in our memories. Cutting the string can be an emotional moment but also a realistic statement about how our lives are always changing and moving onwards.

ANONYMOUS FEEDBACK - PUBLIC SHARING

Sometimes people are shy about talking about themselves but don't mind if others do the talking for them. In this case, pass out note cards of the same color and have everyone write their reflections of the event or experience down on one of them. Put them in a hat or some other receptacle. Once everyone who wants to has written their remarks, have each person select one card to read aloud, making sure that you don't pick your own. Read them aloud and encourage respectful listening to each person's words. Alternatively, you can do this reflection activity as a gallery of feedback and have people put their words on post-its and put them all on a board so that everyone can read them individually.

There are lots of other ways to promote reflection within groups, some more detailed and lengthy and others even more playful and/or symbolic than these. Often, some of the best ways are ones that your own group invents for itself.

CONCLUSION

"No social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of dedicated individuals."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

I wrote this guide to be of practical use to youth leaders, teachers, and young people who want to use research to make a difference in their communities. The best thanks would be if this guide becomes well-worn from continued use. Naturally not everything one needs to know about research is contained in this short guide, but I hope it has enough information to get groups started on their own.

Please send your comments and suggestions for how to improve this guide.

I want to learn about what worked and what didn't work for you as you try out the activities and exercises and/or follow the steps outlined. I especially would love to hear stories of actual action research by youth; what happened, what were the steps taken and what did students learn and accomplish from their experiences? I want to use the real-life examples of students' action research work in future versions of this guide so that new generations of young people can learn more directly from other students who are out there on the front-lines actively making a difference in their communities and using research to help document and describe the ways in which changes are taking place.



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RESEARCH FOR ACTION

May 2004

APPENDICES

READING STRATEGIES

Knowledge Chart

Before reading the text, review the main topic and have students fill in the blanks on the left hand side of the chart with what they already know about the topic, using short sentences or phrases.

Then after reading the text, have students fill in the right hand side of the chart with new facts, using short sentences and phrases. The chart can be kept in a student notebook or portfolio.

Prior Knowledge	New Knowledge
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

KEY IDEAS INFORMATION MEMORY CLUE

KIM technique—a strategy for new vocabulary and new ideas

Students should set up a piece of paper with three columns. When reading an article and encountering new ideas and new words, students should use the three columns to record the actual new words, list some information connected to it, and create a diagram or picture to remind them of the original word or idea.

Key Ideas	Information	Memory Clue
<i>Example: “Inequality”</i>	The way schools are funded	An unbalanced scale
<i>Example “Triangulate”</i>	Use of two or more different sources or types of data to support a position	A triangle

Key Ideas	Information	Memory Clue

This is a technique that allows individuals and groups to better understand a piece of work by reading it a number of different ways. Text rendering asks individuals to read an article, select a portion of it that seems meaningful to them, and to read it out loud. Reading out loud gives voice to both the text and to the participants. It also encourages careful listening, re-hearing, creative thinking and thoughtful silences. There are several steps in the process.



First, everyone reads the selected portion silently.

Second, students select a paragraph or a sentence that feels meaningful and, going around in a circle, people take turns reading out loud. Repeating the same thing someone has already read is perfectly okay. This continues until the group reaches its own logical end point.

Third, students then select a phrase or portion of the section that stood out for them and they read that section out loud in a circle without interruption. Again, repeating the same thing someone has already read is perfectly okay.

Fourth, students select a word from the selected section and read it aloud around the circle.

Fifth, students select a word suggested by the selected section and call it out—one at a time but in no specific order.

Sixth, discuss the variation and choices of sections and words that the group members selected. What did people learn from the particular writing? What did they learn from listening to others? What were the reactions and thoughts that occurred? What insights into the writing did anyone have? What, if anything, did this tell you about the people and the group? What questions were being raised? Take notes and keep a record of this conversation.

At the very end, invite students to do a silent writing about this process. Ask them to consider how it might be a useful tool to use elsewhere and how might they use it, either for themselves personally and/or for the organization.

HOW TO WRITE A THESIS STATEMENT

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What is a Thesis Statement?

Almost all of us—even if we don't do it consciously—look early in an essay for a one or two sentence condensation of the argument or analysis that is to follow. We refer to that condensation as a thesis statement.

Why Should Your Essay Contain a Thesis Statement?

- To test your ideas by distilling them into a sentence or two
- To better organize and develop your argument
- To provide your reader with a “guide” to your argument

In general, your thesis statement will accomplish these goals if you think of the thesis as the answer to the question your paper explores. Here are some helpful hints to get you started.



How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is Assigned

Almost all assignments, no matter how complicated, can be reduced to a single question. Your first step, then, is to distill the assignment into a specific question. For example, if your assignment is “Write a report to the local school board explaining the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class,” turn the request into a question like “What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?” After you’ve chosen the question your essay will answer, compose one or two complete sentences answering that question.

Q: “What are the potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class?”

A: “The potential benefits of using computers in a fourth-grade class are” OR

A: “Using computers in a fourth-grade class promises to improve”

The answer to the question is the thesis statement for the essay.

How to Generate a Thesis Statement if the Topic is Not Assigned

Even if your assignment doesn’t ask a specific question, your thesis statement still needs to answer a question about the issue you’d like to explore. In this situation, your job is to figure out what question you’d like to write about.

A good thesis statement will usually include the following four attributes:

- A subject upon which reasonable people could disagree
- A subject that can be adequately treated given the nature of the assignment
- One main idea
- Conclusions about a subject

Let’s see how to generate a thesis statement for a social policy paper.

Brainstorm the topic

Let’s say that your class focuses upon the problems posed by drug addiction. You find that you are interested in the problems of crack babies, babies born to mothers addicted to crack cocaine.

You start out with a thesis statement like this:

Crack babies.

This fragment isn’t a thesis statement. Instead, it simply indicates a general subject. Furthermore, your reader doesn’t know what you want to say about crack babies.

Narrow the topic

Your readings about the topic, however, have led you to the conclusion that not only do these babies have a difficult time surviving premature births and withdrawal symptoms, but their lives will be even harder as they grow up because they are likely to be raised in an environment of poverty and neglect. You think that there should be programs to help these children.

You change your thesis to look like this:

Programs for crack babies.



This fragment not only announces your subject, but it focuses on one main idea: programs. Furthermore, it raises a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree, because while most people might agree that something needs to be done for these children, not everyone would agree on what should be done or who should do it. You should note that this fragment is not a thesis statement because your reader doesn't know your conclusions on the topic.

Take a position on the topic

After reflecting on the topic a little while longer, you decide that what you really want to say about this topic is that in addition to programs for crack babies, the government should develop programs to help crack children cope and compete.

You revise your thesis to look like this:

More attention should be paid to the environment crack children grow up in.

This statement asserts your position, but the terms more attention and the environment are vague.

Use specific language

You decide to explain what you mean about “the environment,” so you write:

Experts estimate that half of crack babies will grow up in home environments lacking rich cognitive and emotional stimulation.

This statement is specific, but it isn't a thesis. It merely reports a statistic instead of making an assertion.

Make an assertion based on clearly stated support

You finally revise your thesis statement one more time to look like this:

Because half of all crack babies are likely to grow up in homes lacking good cognitive and emotional stimulation, the federal government should finance programs to supplement parental care for crack kids.

Notice how the thesis answers the question, “Why should anything be done for crack kids, and who should do it?” When you started thinking about the paper, you may not have had a specific question in mind, but as you became more involved in the topic, your ideas became more specific. Your thesis changed to reflect your new insights.

How to Tell a Strong Thesis Sentence from a Weak One

1. A strong thesis takes some sort of stand.

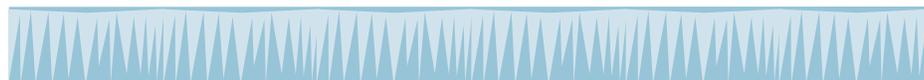
Remember that your thesis needs to show your conclusions about a subject. For example, if you are writing a paper for a class on fitness, you might be asked to choose a popular weight-loss product to evaluate. Here are two thesis statements:

There are some negative and positive aspects to the Banana Herb Tea Supplement.

This is a weak thesis. First, it fails to take a stand. Second, the phrase “negative-and positive aspects” is vague.

Because Banana Herb Tea Supplement promotes rapid weight loss that results in the loss of muscle and lean body mass, it poses a potential danger to customers.

This is a strong thesis because it takes a stand.



2. A strong thesis justifies discussion.

Your thesis should indicate the point of the discussion. If your assignment is to write a paper on kinship systems, using your own family as an example, you might come up with either of these two thesis statements:

My family is an extended family.

This is a weak thesis because it states an observation. Your reader won't be able to tell the point of the statement, and will probably stop reading.

While most American families would view consanguineal marriage as a threat to the nuclear family structure, many Iranian families, like my own, believe that these marriages help reinforce kinship ties in an extended family.

This is a strong thesis because it shows how your experience contradicts a widely-accepted view. A good strategy for creating a strong thesis is to show that the topic is controversial. Readers will be interested in reading the rest of the essay to see how you support your point.

3. A strong thesis expresses one main idea.

Readers need to be able to see that your paper has one main point. If your thesis expresses more than one idea, then you might confuse your readers about the subject of your paper. For example:

Companies need to exploit the marketing potential of the Internet, and web pages can provide both advertising and customer support.

This is a weak thesis statement because the reader can't decide whether the paper is about marketing on the Internet or web pages. To revise the thesis, the relationship between the two ideas needs to become clearer. One way to revise the thesis would be to write:

Because the Internet is filled with tremendous marketing potential, companies should exploit this potential by using web pages that offer both advertising and customer support.

This is a strong thesis because it shows that the two ideas are related. Hint: a great many clear and engaging thesis statements contain words like "because," "since," "so," "although," "unless," and "however."

4. A strong thesis statement is specific.

A thesis statement should show exactly what your paper will be about, and will help you keep your paper to a manageable topic. For example, if you write a paper on hunger, you might say:

World hunger has many causes and effects.

This is a weak thesis statement for two major reasons. First, "world hunger" can't be discussed thoroughly in five or ten pages. Second, "many causes and effects" is vague. You should be able to identify specific causes and effects. A revised thesis might look like this:

Hunger persists in Appalachia because jobs are scarce and farming in the infertile soil is rarely profitable.

This is a strong thesis because it narrows the subject to a more specific and manageable topic and it also identifies the specific causes for the existence of hunger.



SUGGESTIONS ON KEEPING A JOURNAL

Reflective Journals:

Journals provide a way for students to express their thoughts and feelings. However, a common tendency is for journal entries to become a mere log of events rather than a reflective activity in which students consider their experience in light of learning objectives. Before assigning a reflective journal, consider what learning objective the journal is intended to meet. Journals are an effective way to develop self-understanding and strengthen intra-personal skills. Journals can also be a way to collect personal data during a period of time to be summarized in a more formal reflection near the end of the project. Types of reflective journals include:

Personal Journal: Students free-write journal entries each week about any experience during the research project. If personal journals are submitted to the instructor, students can maintain a sense of privacy by earmarking pages they prefer not to be read by others.

Dialogue Journal: Students submit loose-leaf pages from a dialogue journal bi-weekly for the instructor to read and comment on. While labor intensive for the instructor, this can provide continual feedback to students and prompt new questions for students to consider during the project. Dialogue journals could also be read and responded to by a peer.

Critical Incident Journal: This type of journal entry focuses the student on analysis of a particular event that occurred. By answering the following set of prompts, students are asked to consider their thoughts and reactions and articulate the action they plan to take in the future: For example, describe a significant event that occurred as part of the research experience. Why was this significant to you? What underlying issues (societal, interpersonal, curricular) surfaced as a result of this experience? How will this incident influence your future behavior and/or your thinking about such events?

Personal Narrative: An interesting self-assessment technique is to ask students to write a narrative of themselves as a learner. Based on personal data through vignettes written regularly during the semester, or based on a personal journal, students create a story about themselves as a learner. This activity sets a context for reflection with attention directed toward a finished product that is creative in nature. Personal narratives give students an opportunity to creatively describe personal learning and growth as a student during a research project.



JOURNAL WRITING WORKSHEET

SITE (e.g., school, project)

Date

DAILY EVENTS (facts only)

OPINION (feelings and thoughts about yours and others' behavior)

CONNECTIONS (your questions that relate to today's events, experiences that fits with your research work today)

ACTION (your plans for the next steps)



JOURNAL WRITING PROMPT QUESTIONS

DAILY EVENTS: Write a fair and impartial account of the events that occur. Don't give your opinion; merely present the facts.

OPINIONS: Describe your thoughts and feelings about what happened—about your behavior and behavior of others.

CONNECTIONS: Look at your research questions and discuss how the day's events relate to them. Are your questions still appropriate? Do you see the need for any changes? How does this assignment fit with what you are learning about in your research?

ACTIONS: While you have the day's events fresh in your mind, outline actions for your next research activity based on what you learned today.

ON-LINE RESOURCES FOR RESEARCH

Youth Resources

Here are just a few of the many websites that are centered on Youth Activism and provide good resources and information for both research and inspiration.

www.whatkidscando.com

www.youthactivism.org

www.aed.org/youth/youth_links.html

www.freechild.org/youth_activism_2htm

www.soundout.org

A NOTE ON WEBSITES: For students who have limited access to major libraries, conducting web-based research offers a greater access to materials. As anyone who has spent even a small amount of time searching the web can attest, there are literally millions of websites and it is easy to get lost in them. In making some choices about which ones to examine, refer to the information associated with the computer scavenger hunt (Learning to do Computer-Based Searches and Analyzing Internet Sites).

For students who are interested in education and school-related action research, one general recommendation is to look at the work produced by the various Regional Educational Laboratories. These are educational research think tanks, set up around the country and funded by the federal government, each one devoted to a specific topic or set of topics. The writing they produce is often short, concise, and organized for a variety of readers. Visit www.relnetwork.org to locate a full range of them.

Partial List of Educational Journals, Websites and Sources for Research on Schools

[Some or portions (without subscription costs) of these are available on-line, others can be found in larger libraries.]

Catalyst, Voices of Chicago School Reform On-line community authored newsletter that chronicles the events and activities of school reform efforts in Chicago. Very readable. (www.catalyst-chicago.org)

Educational Leadership Short articles written for teachers, principals, as well as for non-academic types. (www.ascd.org/cms/index.cfm?TheViewID=353)

Education and Urban Society Often produce special issues devoted to a single topic with many different authors and perspectives. Academic in tone. (www.sagepub.com/journals/00131245.htm)

Education Week A weekly newspaper of educational issues at all levels—international, federal, state, regional and local. (www.edweek.org)

Harvard Educational Review Longer analytical pieces with an emphasis on culture and qualitative research. Academic tone and content. (www.gse.harvard.edu/~hepg/her.html)

Multicultural Review Centers on issues on racial and ethnic diversity in education. Academic in tone and content. (www.mcreview.com)

Phi Delta Kappan Also short articles; one of the premiere periodicals in education. (www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm)

Public Education Network A free on-line weekly subscription and a collection of often the most current issues, research, policy and thinking about education and topics related to public schools.

A good source to keep on top of what is happening across the country and from a number of vantage points. (pen@publiceducation.org)

Public School Notebook Philadelphia's watchdog on the public schools. They are always looking for community authors and especially young people who have research to share. (www.thenotebook.org)

Rethinking Schools Published by practicing teachers, it has an openly progressive/radical perspective focused mostly on urban schools. (www.rethinkingschools.org)

Teachers College Record Academic in tone and length but often very interesting articles. Partially available on-line. (www.tcrecord.org)



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