



GATHERING INFORMATION

Every composition process starts with gathering the information you intend to discuss.

Inquiry Planning

The inquiry planner can be a useful step to identify the intent of your research and plan your research process. You can always revisit this as your research changes your thinking or opens you to new questions.

What is your topic?

What is your interest in the topic?

- ◆ What experience/knowledge do you bring to the topic?
- ◆ Why are you interested in the topic?
- ◆ How is it “personally meaningful?”
- ◆ What questions motivate your curiosity?

How will you investigate the topic and your questions about it?

- ◆ Identify the particular field of research.
- ◆ Identify the salient issues of the topic.
- ◆ Identify professional journals in the field.
- ◆ Compile a list of key words for researching.

Collecting Information

Once you know what you want to know, you can begin the process of actual research. At first you should be like a vacuum sucking up as much information as you can: facts, statistics, sensory details, quotations,



dialogue, photos, anything and everything that might connect to your idea about the topic. Let your curiosity and the following principles guide you. Later you can start to sort through what you've gathered.

- ◆ Dedicate a notebook or computer file or journal to the project. It helps to keep all your information in one place.
- ◆ If we don't have enough of the right information, we cannot write well, so remember the iceberg theory of writing. Just as most of the iceberg is submerged, out of sight, so will most of what you collect fail to emerge in your finished piece. You collect so that you learn as much as you can, so that you can make an informed decision about what you want to communicate, and so that when the time comes to write, you can select and use the best, most appropriate information.
- ◆ Write about the material you've gathered: summarize what you've read, connect ideas and stories and experiences, compare and contrast, find points of agreement and divergence. This thinking will help you begin to focus your thinking and identify your mission.

Selecting the Best Information

Once you know your focus and mission, reread all that information you've collected, pick the best for your purpose, and identify any gaps that you need to fill. Remember that details are the heart of good writing, but only the right details. Readers will get frustrated and confused if you use details that don't clearly serve your mission. Here are some tools you can use to help you select information.

- ◆ Give each piece of information a grade, A-F, based on its relevance or importance to your mission. The "A" material you will definitely use. The "B" material you might possibly use. Remember the iceberg theory of writing. Just as most of the iceberg lies out of sight below



the water's surface, anything information that earns less than "B" should stay out of your finished piece.

- ◆ Use the ladder of abstraction to see where you need to find more concrete examples. On this ladder the most abstract ideas (like love, growing up, etc.) are at the top while the most real (like a first kiss, stepping across the stage at your graduation, etc.) are at the bottom. Good writing uses the concrete stuff at the bottom of the ladder to support the claims you make at the top of the ladder, and the abstract stuff at the top of the ladder to give the context and meaning to the examples you provide from the bottom of the ladder. You can grade your information using the ladder of abstraction as the scale, giving the most concrete information a "C", and the most abstract an "A", for example. The "C" material will need some explaining by you. The "A" material will need some supporting, concrete evidence.

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