

This activity is from the book [EmpoWord: A Student-Centered Anthology & Handbook for College Writers](#) (p. 289-292) by Shane Abrams and is reproduced here under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License](#).

## Activity: Idea Generation: Curiosity Catalogue<sup>1</sup> and Collaborative Inquiry

This exercise encourages you to collaborate with other classmates to develop a topic, working questions, a path of inquiry, and a baseline of communal knowledge. You should complete Part One independently, then gather with a small group of two or three other students for Part Two, and a different small group of two or three other students for Part Three: Small Group. (If you are working on this exercise as a full class, complete Part One, Part Two, and Part Three: Gallery Walk.) Before you get started, divide three large sheets of paper (11x17 is best) into columns like this:


### Part One

Create a catalogue of topics you are personally curious about—things that you want to learn more about. These don't have to be revolutionary things right away; it's more important that they're meaningful to you. First, choose three of the following broad topic headings:



Politics	Food	Music and Art

On your first sheet of three-column paper, write those three topic headings.

Politics	Food	Music and Art
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The electoral college</li> <li>• Diplomacy (relations with other countries)</li> <li>• Voter enfranchisement</li> <li>• Autocracies</li> <li>• Relationship to economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Michelin stars</li> <li>• Reality TV shows</li> <li>• Stressful kitchens</li> <li>• Processed foods and added sugars</li> <li>• Food deserts</li> <li>• Mexican food and culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicly funded art museums</li> <li>• Learning musical instruments</li> <li>• Cubism</li> <li>• Calypso</li> <li>• Performance art</li> </ul>

Next, underneath each topic heading, write bulleted lists of as many subtopics or related ideas that come to mind that interest you. (Try not to censor yourself here—the idea is to generate a large number of bullet points. To some extent, this is an exercise in free association: what are the first things that come to mind when you think of each topic?) Spend ten to fifteen minutes on your lists. Then, take a

five-minute break away from your lists and clear your head; return to your lists for three more minutes to make any additions that you didn't think of at first.

Read over your lists, making note especially of items that surprised you. Choose the three items from the full page that most interest you. You can choose one from each column, three from the same, or any combination of lists, so long as you have three items that you care about.

## Part Two

Begin to develop a working knowledge by collaborating with classmates to consider the topic from several perspectives beyond your own.

Write your three favorite list items from Part One in the headings for your second piece of three-column paper. Sit in a circle with your groupmates; each student should pass their three-column paper one position clockwise. For five minutes, each student will free-write *what they already know* about each topic using prose, lists, or illustrations. Then, rotate your papers another step—repeat until you have your original sheet of paper back.

The electoral college	Processed foods and added sugars	Learning musical instruments
People were talking a lot about it for the 2000 and 2016 elections.	People say that processed foods are not good for you.	Some schools require you to learn an instrument in elementary school.
It doesn't correspond with "popular vote."	Added sugars are the opposite of natural sugars.	Many people teach themselves how to play an instrument.
Some states divide their electoral votes according to "popular vote."	Processed foods taste better—at least in my opinion.	Once you learn one instrument in a family, you can often pick up other ones in that family pretty quickly (e.g., saxophone and clarinet).
I remember hearing the term "faithless electors" but I don't remember what it means.	Most American kids love processed foods.	

Review the knowledge your groupmates compiled on your sheet. Have they offered anything that surprises you—stuff you didn't know already, conflicting perspectives, or connections to other ideas or topics?

## Part Three: Small Group

Begin to develop working and research questions by collaborating with your classmates to explore different curiosities. (This part of the exercise is designed for a small group of three or four total students, including you, different from the group in Part Two. If you are completing this part of the exercise with your whole class, skip to Part Three: Gallery Walk.)

The electoral college	Processed foods and added sugars	Learning musical instruments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How did the electoral college come into being?</li> <li>• How do other democracies conduct elections?</li> <li>• When did different oppressed groups win the right to vote? How?</li> <li>• What alternatives have been proposed for the U.S.?</li> <li>• Why is it called a "college"?</li> <li>• Is it fair?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you avoid processed sugars?</li> <li>• How does the body metabolize natural and added sugars differently?</li> <li>• Does advertising influence children's preferences for sugary foods?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does learning a musical instrument influence other parts of your life?</li> <li>• Does sheet music count as a different language?</li> <li>• Which instruments or instrument families are best for young musicians?</li> <li>• Should the government subsidize youth music programs outside of schools?</li> </ul>

Write your three favorite list items from Part One, potentially modified by insights from Part Two, in the headings for your third piece of three-column paper.

Sit in a circle with your groupmates; each student should pass their three-column paper one position clockwise. For five minutes, each student will free-write questions about each topic. No question is too big or small, too simple or complex. Try to generate as many questions as you possibly can. Then, rotate your papers another step—repeat

until you have your original sheet of paper back.

Review the questions your groupmates compiled on your sheet. Have they offered anything that surprises you—issues you haven't thought of, relationships between questions, recurring themes or patterns of interest, or foci that might yield interesting answers?

### Part Three: Gallery Walk

Begin to develop working and research questions by collaborating with your classmates to explore different curiosities. (This part of the exercise is designed for an entire class of students of about twenty to twenty-five students, including you. If you are completing this part of the exercise a small group of three to four total students, including you, return to Part Three: Small Group.)

Write your three favorite list items from Part One, potentially modified by insights from Part Two, in the headings for your third piece of three-column paper. Every student should tape their papers to the classroom wall, just below eye-level, such that it forms a circular shape around the perimeter of the room. Each student in the class should stand in front of their

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paper, then rotate one position clockwise. At each new page, you will have two minutes to review the headings and free-write questions about each topic. No question is too big or small, too simple or complex. Try to generate as many questions as you possibly can. Then, rotate through clockwise until you've returned to your original position.

Review the questions your classmates compiled on your sheet. Have they offered anything that surprises you—issues you haven't thought of, relationships between questions, recurring themes

or patterns of interest, or foci that might yield interesting answers?

After completing all three parts of this exercise, try to articulate a viable and interesting research question that speaks to your curiosity. Make sure its scope is appropriate to your rhetorical situation; you can use the exercise "Focus: Expanding and Contracting Scope" later in this chapter to help expand or narrow your scope.

If you're still struggling to find a topic, try some of other idea generation activities that follow this, or check in with your school's Writing Center, your teacher, or your peers.

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<sup>1</sup> This exercise is loosely based on Ballenger's "Interest Inventory" exercise. Ballenger, Bruce. *The Curious Researcher*, 9th edition, Pearson, 2018, pp. 21-22.