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LEARNING GOALS

At the close of the workshop, students will be able to:

- Sufficiently narrow a broad topic, and identify the criteria for recognizing when such a topic has been articulated.
- Articulate analytical, researchable questions about a focused topic.
- Name a variety of motivating purposes for research, such as the creation of a new process; the clarification or complication of previous understanding; the illumination of a contemporary issue; or the replication of earlier, preliminary findings.

OVERVIEW

In this workshop, three primary activities take place:

- Students work collaboratively and then independently to narrow broad topics by iteratively parsing them into subtopics.
- Again working collaboratively before turning to individual projects, students articulate analytical research questions they might raise about their focused topics.
- Observing models, students identify potential motivations for research—such as creating a new process, clarifying or complicating previous understanding, or illuminating a contemporary issue.

LESSON PLAN

Introduction

Begin by introducing the contrast between the research process as it is sometimes defined—the collecting and presenting of facts—and **the research process as the pursuit of a specific inquiry with significance for readers**. Foreground the workshop’s three-step movement from *a narrowed topic*, to *a research question*, and finally toward *a project with significance* by headlining the whiteboard with the following template:

I am studying _____, because I want to find out _____, so that my reader understands _____.

Part One: Narrowing Topics

1. **Introduce the process of narrowing a broad topic by asking students to suggest a few sample topics;** these may even be those students are currently thinking of for pending projects.
 - Reflect briefly on the relative breadth of their samples, choosing one of their broader topics to use as a model.
 - Note it on the whiteboard.
2. **Distribute Handout 1, “Strategies for Narrowing a Topic.”**
 - Identify the diagram as representing the narrowing process of repeatedly parsing a broad topic into subtopics.
 - Explain that experienced researchers have a few strategies for breaking down topics that students will now work to extract from the diagram.
3. **Provide time for independent reading.** Allow students to trace and examine the diagram for a few minutes.
4. **Ask, “So what kind of narrowing is happening in the pink examples? How did the researcher subdivide ‘Published Writing’?”** Elicit understanding that a topic can be narrowed by time period, then move to the green examples (geographic narrowing), and the slightly-more-abstract blue ones (narrowing by genre or form).
5. **Continue facilitating as students discuss and extract other strategies for subdividing a topic.** Elicit strategies such as:
 - Narrowing by case study or site (Bates and Oberlin)
 - Narrowing by population (especially common in social science disciplines; loosely represented here by the white- and black-owned newspapers)
 - Narrowing by the primary texts to be analyzed, or the “exhibits” (John Brown’s raid, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*)
 - Narrowing by theoretical framework or perspective (loosely represented here by the various Protestant theologies)

6. **Returning to the shared example on the board, guide students through a couple rounds of topic and subtopic division.** Explain that the subdividing might stop when the narrowed topic:
 - itself breaks down into subtopics that lead to clear *sections* of writing—not pages and pages.
 - is researchable (that is, begets clear patterns in search results).
 - leads to *How?* and *Why?* questions (as opposed to dozens of fact-based ones).
7. **Distribute Handout 2, “Identifying a Research Question with Significance.”**
 - Connect the structure of the handout to the template on the whiteboard by reading each of the three completions of the template.
 - Then draw students’ attention to the “I am studying...”/Narrowed Topic column.
8. **Bearing these models and the group practice in mind, ask students to articulate a narrowed topic of their own.** Provide time for them to independently practice subtopic listing before briefly sharing out and discussing some of their samples.
9. **Ask students to record their own Narrowed Topic in the “I am studying...” column.**

Part Two: Articulating a Research Question

1. **Segue to the “Because I want to find out...” portion of the template.** Read aloud the examples of Research Questions. Guide students to close-read these models in order to identify key characteristics. Encourage students to note that effective research questions:
 - **Address specific, narrowed subjects** (the molecular shape of one kind of chemical compound; the observation of a thematic thread in Boston-based abolitionist rhetoric)
 - **Facilitate analysis with open-ended *How?* and *Why?* structures**
 - **May suggest structure for a draft or methodology for an analysis** (beginning with a close reading of Boston-based abolitionist rhetoric; obtaining transcripts of the floor discussion between Senators prior to their voting on the Glass-Steagall Act)
 - **Facilitate participation in—or even directly acknowledge—an existing scholarly conversation**
2. **Provide time for students to draft questions in the “Because I want to find out...” column.** Time permitting, share these out.

Part Three: Identifying Significance

1. **Explain that while a writer’s Research Question may begin as a personal interest, sooner or later it must be shaped to have significance or utility for readers.** Name and record on the whiteboard examples of motivating purposes for research:
 - *A research paper might review evidence to make a real-world policy recommendation.*
 - *Or seek to replicate earlier scientific findings.*
2. **Draw students’ attention to the final column of Handout 2 (“So that my reader understands...”).** Read the specific examples aloud and ask students to describe generally the

motivating purposes behind them. Add these and more to the board, eliciting a comprehensive list of potential motivating purposes for research:

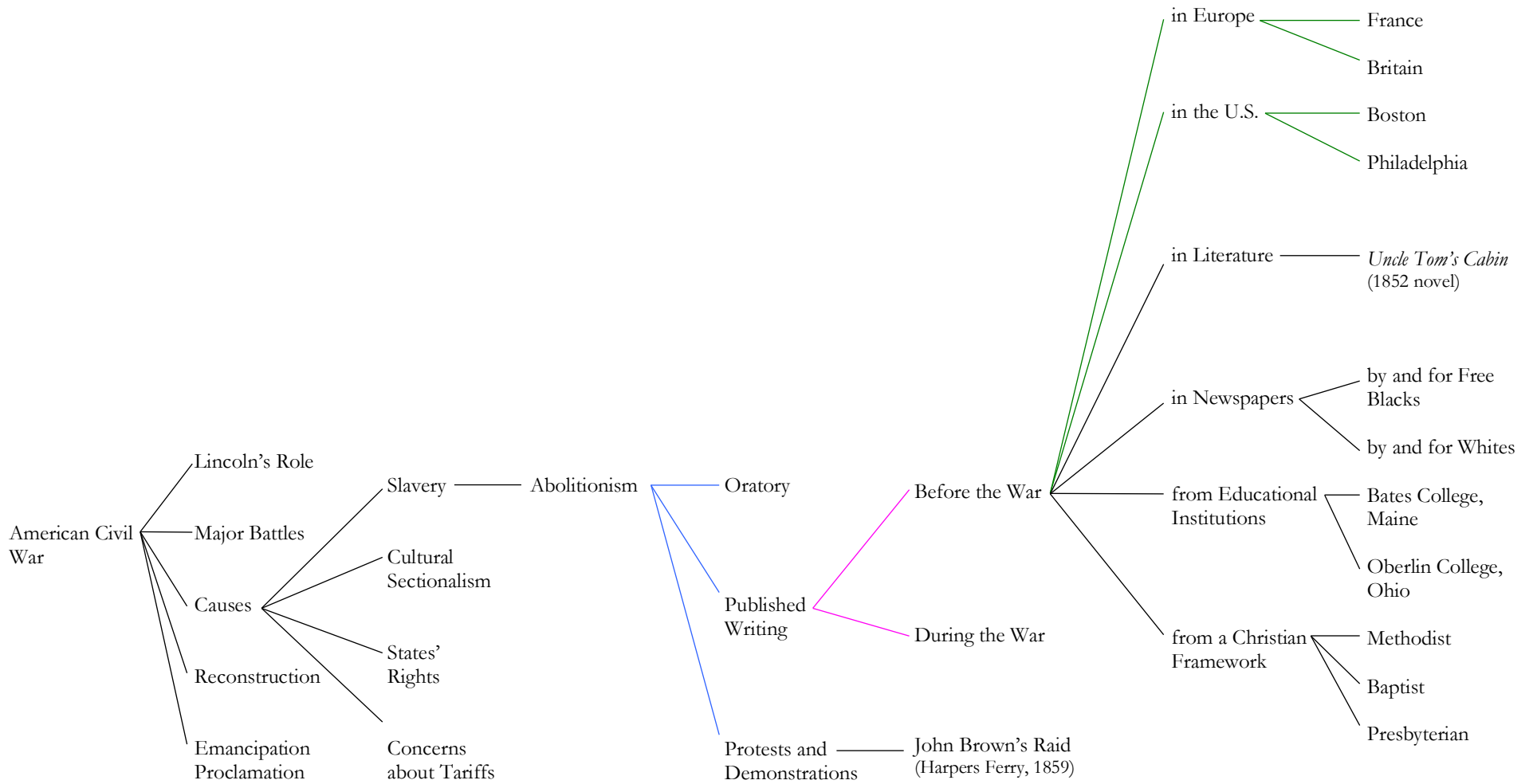
- Making an evidence-based recommendation
- Replicating (or challenging) earlier, preliminary findings (1-benzazepines example)
- Clarifying or complicating previous understanding (abolitionist rhetoric example)
- Introducing new areas of inquiry or explanation (Glass-Steagall example)
- Creating a new process
- Developing a new application for an existing process
- Illuminating a contemporary issue

3. **Ask students to complete the final portion of the template for their own topic.**

- Allay anxiety by explaining that identifying significance can take time:
- *It may be too early in your research process to know for sure why and how it matters—often, this significance comes once you’ve better defined your argument or learned more about the scholarly conversation around your narrowed topic—but it’s always good to consider what work your paper might do for your readers.*

4. **Wrap up.** Time permitting, share out and discuss the completed statements.

STRATEGIES FOR NARROWING A TOPIC



IDENTIFYING A RESEARCH QUESTION WITH SIGNIFICANCE

I am studying... (Narrowed Topic)	...because I want to find out... (Research Question)	...so that readers understand... (Motivation or Argument)
Differences in Boston-based and Philadelphia-based abolitionist rhetoric...	...why Boston-based abolitionists emphasized broad themes of social justice...	...how previous scholars may have overlooked the role of free black Bostonians in shaping anti-slavery ideals.
The alkylation of 1-benzazepines...	...how reliably the addition of alkyl groups transforms the molecular shape of these compounds into a more applicable, marketable form...	[Immediate]...how replicable previous studies of alkylation may be. [Long-term]...whether synthesizing these compounds can contribute to more efficient manufacture of antiretroviral treatments for HIV.
The origins of the Glass-Steagall Act...	...why lawmakers supported its passage...	...that their motives resulted not from careful economic analysis but rather from ideological preconceptions about the role of commercial banks in society.