

A3: Topic selection and team formation exercise

This assignment has two parts: (1) Give us your first shot at defining a topic and unpacking it into digestible parts, and (2) Put the gears in motion to establish your student-mentor research team. The assignment is worth 10% of your grade. It is due in class on Thurs., Oct 8, 2009.

Part 1. Your Senior Research Project (SRP): What is it, who cares, why, how will you do it?

Urban studies are inherently about the interrelationships of place and space, and about understanding the myriad factors that make up our complex society, the built environment and the natural world.

Now it's time for you to think systematically about your ideas for your SRP. This part of the assignment asks you to give us general and specific answers to each of the 5 questions below. Limit your replies to a total of five pages of double spaced text. It is understood that you don't have in-depth knowledge of the topic at this time, but you do have almost all your urban studies education to draw on, as well as our Grand Challenges and Opportunities database.

1. **What:** What are you really interested in? What is the problem? What caused it? What has been done to solve it in other places? Are there different perspectives on it and if so, where do they come from (and put that in with the 'who' part!)? Is it physical, social, political or some combination of them? Are there patterns occurring and if so, what is causing those patterns? What is the relationship between the factors that are present in your issue? Did the problem/issue occur because it was near water, near roads, in a sunny place, in a desert, because of an election, because of money or lack thereof, because of the plant life, the topography of the land? Have things changed because the place has changed or because time has passed? What is the rate of change?
2. **Who:** Who are the players? What groups (community, political, special interest)? What ethnicities? Common characteristics? Who is affected by the problem, process, and/or outcome?
3. **When:** Is it recent? Historical? Caused by a certain event? Caused by external forces or internal? Political reasons? Happened over time or just once?
4. **Where:** Are you interested in San Diego? In the region? In California? In a particular neighborhood? Bounded by certain streets or landmarks? Inside a building? On a campus? Does it happen in more than one place or is the idea confined to a certain location (if so, why)? Does your issue deal with things that are close together and thus impact each other, or far apart and thus impact each other? If you look at the issue from another angle, does it look different? Are there particular objects that are important to your topic, such as street lights, benches, parking spaces, buildings, sunshine, views, transit routes? Did your issue/topic happen because of where it is (i.e., how important is the place itself)?
5. **How:** Is it a physical process? Is it an engineering process? What does it take/what did it take to create the issue? (You can draw on all of the above to deduce the how – how did it happen? Why did it happen? What is it that is happening?) If you were think about and graphically represent your topic in terms of how it started and where it is now, either as a flow chart or a diagram that is a tree (or maybe a

forest!) with roots being the causes and the trunk and branches being the different parts of the topic, what would that look like?

When you've completed this part of the assignment, you will have a greater understanding of what your potential project might entail, how extensive or narrow it is, and you'll be able to refine it appropriately with the help of your TA and the professor. You should keep this document and complete it at least two more times during the research process, so you can evaluate what is new to the project and to ensure that you are addressing the critical components of your topic. Begin a research journal (optional) and put this in it, with updates as your journey proceeds.

The following resources on the class website can help get your creative intellectual juices flowing as you grapple with the above conceptual tasks:

All the items below are available at: <http://www.seniorsequence.net/index.php/186/handouts/>

- JPER Editors guide to writing a scholarly article ([jper-manuscript_tips.pdf](#))
- Four Traditions of Planning Theory ([click here for pdf](#))
- Guide to Critical Thinking and Action for Urban-Regional Studies ([ho-principles-sustainable-city-regions.pdf](#))
- Narrative devices offer another useful way to think about organizing your thoughts/approach. See the writing tips page for more details: [Concepts and Theories.pdf](#)
- SRP Worksheet (story diagram) ([Click here for pdf](#))
- SRP Worksheet (examples of story diagrams) ([sample-story-diagrams.ppt](#))
- Research Design and Methods Worksheet ([click here for pdf](#))
- Evidence Worksheet ([click here for word doc](#))

Part 2. Putting the gears in motion to establish your student-mentor research team.

This part of the assignment gets the student-mentor research team formation process underway (preparation for breakout groups to take place during class on Tuesday, Oct. 13). During class time on Tuesday, Oct. 6 all students will be instructed to sort themselves according to the Area of Concentration (AOC) they selected when completing Assignment #2 (Register to class web site; begin on-line research portfolio; select AOC). To facilitate this process of birds-of-a-feather- flocking-together on Oct. 6 and Oct 13 I will bring to class 10 banners (poster boards) each of which displays one AOC.

All you have to do for this part of the assignment is generate a list of each student that you meet with in class on Oct 6 under the banner of your AOC. For each student you list, include their name, tentative SRP topic, and a two or three sentence description of their topic (as you heard them describe it). This is intended to break the ice and get you all connected on a scholarly level. You will get the chance to meet again in groups during class on Tuesday, Oct 13. You should exchange emails with one another and begin exploring how you might find common ground for purposes of helping one another as a team. On Oct. 13 during class you will be expected to designate a team leader and begin the process of getting a mentor for your team. I created a guide explaining how best to approach mentors on the class web site at:

http://www.seniorsequence.net/images/mentor_files/How_to_approach_your_mentor.pdf