The Topoi

The topoi (Greek for “places”) date all the way back to ancient Greece; Aristotle used them to approach a topic from different angles, in order to understand an issue more fully, and to discover new ideas with which to construct an argument. The topoi are a series of questions that can be asked of any subject. Keep in mind that not every question listed here is applicable to a given topic; as you use them, you’ll find that certain categories of inquiry (definition, comparison, cause & effect, testimony, circumstance) are better suited to certain subjects.

Although this system of inquiry is many centuries old, it’s still a very useful and effective way to generate ideas on a given topic.

Definition:
1. How does the dictionary define ______________?  
2. What do I mean by ______________?  
3. When is the meaning of ______________ misunderstood?  
4. What group of things does ______________ seem to belong to? How is ______________ different from other things in this group?  
5. What parts can ______________ be divided into?  
6. Does ______________ mean something now it didn’t years ago?  
7. What other words mean approximately the same as ______________?  
8. What are some concrete examples of ______________?

Comparison & Contrast:
1. What tensions or oppositions exist in ______?  
2. What are potential contradictions in ______?  
3. Are there paradoxes/irreconcilable contradictions in ______?  
4. What is ______________ similar to? How?  
5. What is ______________ different from? How?  
6. ______________ is superior to what? How?  
7. ______________ is inferior to what? How?

Cause & Effect:
1. What causes ______________?  
2. What are the effects of ______________?  
3. What is the purpose of ______________?  
4. Why does ______________ happen?  
5. What is the consequence of ______________?  
6. What comes after ______________?  
7. What comes before ______________?
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Testimony:
1. What have I heard people say about ____________?
2. Do I know any facts or statistics about ____________? What?
3. Have I talked with anyone about ____________?
4. Do I know any well-known saying about ____________?
5. Can I quote proverbs or poems about ____________?
6. Are there any laws about ____________?
7. Have I read anything about ____________ in books or journal articles?
8. Do I want to do any research on ____________?

Circumstance:
1. Is ____________ possible or impossible?
2. What qualities, conditions, or circumstances make ____________ possible or impossible?
3. Suppose that ____________ is possible. Is it feasible? Why?
4. When did ____________ happen previously?
5. Who has done or experienced ____________?
6. Who can do ____________?
7. If ____________ starts what makes it end?
8. What would it take for ____________ to happen now?
9. What would prevent ____________ from happening now?