

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?