

Developing an Original Argument: A Strategy for College Writing

Maria Medvedeva & Timothy Recuber

To cite this article: Maria Medvedeva & Timothy Recuber (2016) Developing an Original Argument: A Strategy for College Writing, College Teaching, 64:3, 139-144, DOI: [10.1080/87567555.2015.1125841](https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2015.1125841)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2015.1125841>



Accepted author version posted online: 04 Feb 2016.
Published online: 30 Mar 2016.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 219



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

Developing an Original Argument: A Strategy for College Writing

Maria Medvedeva and Timothy Recuber

Princeton University

ABSTRACT

An essay's motive or research problem consists of the rhetorical moves illuminating why that essay matters—what puzzling elements of a primary source it resolves, which contradictions in the data it explains, or what gaps in the literature it fills. This article invites college instructors to dedicate some of their classroom time to teaching students how to construct original, motive-driven arguments. More specifically, the article describes the conceptual triangle technique that uses a simple three-point concept map as the first step in active argument building. This technique is simple and flexible enough to be adapted across subject areas, data, and disciplines. The focus on scholarly motive in general and the use of the conceptual triangle in particular can be effective ways to help academic writers at all levels to develop original arguments that matter.

KEYWORDS

composition; concept map;
research problem; motive;
thesis

Few questions occupy as prominent a place in academic discourse as the “so what?” question. Various forms of this question—including “Why did you choose this topic?”; “Why is it important?”; and “How does your study contribute to the field?”—are commonly voiced by reviewers and echoed in our evaluations of our own ideas, in conversations with colleagues, and in “elevator speeches” at professional conferences. These questions are also frequent in instructors’ feedback, aiming to help students articulate their ideas more precisely and occupy their place in scholarly conversations more decisively. Indeed, writers can never assume that readers will find answers to such reflective questions on their own. Presenting a persuasive argument requires addressing them explicitly (Graff and Birkenstein 2010).

There are also less immediate but far-reaching benefits. Reflective questions make students more aware of the writing process and of the writerly choices it involves, and encourage students who do not typically see themselves as strong writers, especially learners with multicultural or disadvantaged backgrounds (Fernsten and Reda 2011). Moreover, such practices can extend positive engagement with scholarly writing beyond one paper or one course. As Sommers and Saltz (2004, 127) found, students “who see writing as something more than an assignment, who write about something that matters to them, are best able to sustain an interest in academic writing throughout their undergraduate careers.”

At an even deeper level, these reflective practices are bound up with the development of critical, higher-level

thinking. First-year students often come to college with simplistic notions of causality, little concern for epistemology, and a bifurcated view of the world into discrete poles of good and evil, truth and falsehood (Roberts 2011). Writing with “so what?” questions helps students complicate such dualistic worldviews. By encouraging active engagement not only with real and imagined audiences, but also with alternative perspectives, reflective questions shift the authority toward the writer and foster critical analysis (Massengill 2011; Roberts 2011).

There is, however, one problem. Despite their obvious value, “so what?” questions can be the hardest to answer—for writers at all levels. In the opening pages of his book *Methods of Discovery*, Andrew Abbott (2004) describes students’ sense of frustration and confusion about the elusive “scholarly contribution” that they aspire and are expected to make:

It is a surprising fact that many good students, when they sit down to write course papers or bachelor’s theses or even doctoral dissertations, fear that they have nothing to say. They understand methods. They know about sources and data. But their own contribution seems to them obvious or trivial. (Abbott 2004, xi)

Abbott goes on to propose that the current pedagogy could be in part to blame. Its excessive emphasis on literatures and methods, at the expense of teaching students to actually create their own theoretical arguments, invariably leads to essays with multiple sources but little coherence and even less room for the author’s own voice.

What, then, does it take to develop one's own original argument? The first element to such an argument is a genuine puzzle about the practices, findings, or texts being analyzed—something mysterious or unexpected in the data. The second element is a response to that puzzle that solves or explains it. The puzzle and its solution correspond to what is called, in the writing program where the authors of this article teach, scholarly “motive” and thesis. It is this combination of a motive and thesis to which instructors typically refer when they ask students to develop an original argument.

In our experience teaching writing-intensive seminars, many students feel familiar with the concept of thesis from their high-school composition classes, but far fewer have a sense that the thesis only works when it responds to a scholarly motive. The essay's motive consists of the rhetorical moves or questions illuminating why that essay “should interest a real person... why it isn't simply obvious, why there's a mystery to unfold, how the matter is different from what one might expect or some have said—why an essay needs writing” (Harvey 1994, 650). Other composition scholars often call this the “research problem” (Booth, Colomb, and Williams 2008). This article uses the two terms—motive and research problem—interchangeably.

Right from the start, developing an original argument calls for a move that many students are not used to: they are asked to begin their arguments with questions rather than conclusive claims. Not surprisingly, it can be a

daunting task—especially when explicit techniques for identifying research problems are a rare feature of the college curriculum. In that spirit, we invite college instructors to dedicate some of their classroom time to more explicitly teaching students how to create original arguments by focusing on the research problem. This article proposes and describes a technique that uses a simple three-point concept map as the first step in building an original argument.

Teaching original argumentation with concept mapping: The conceptual triangle

When the scientist and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov set to answer the question “How do people get new ideas?” he chose “cross-connections” as the answer. In his essay *On Creativity*, Asimov wrote that “[t]he history of human thought would make it seem that there is difficulty in thinking of an idea even when all the facts are on the table. Making the cross-connection requires a certain daring” (Asimov [1959] 2014, para. 10). Simple concept maps, we suggest, could facilitate this creative risk taking.

Concept mapping is not a new pedagogical strategy. First developed out of Joseph Novak's research into children's understanding of scientific concepts in the 1970s, today this strategy is highly regarded in both academia and non-academic sectors (Novak and Cañas 2006). The aim of concept mapping is to detail and visualize relationships between ideas (Davies 2010,

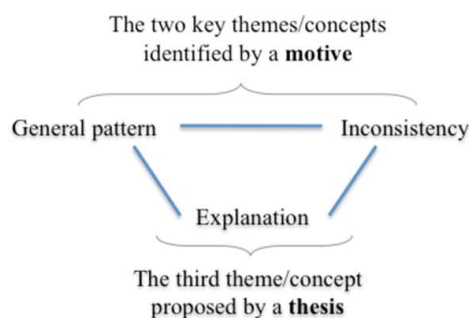


Figure 1A

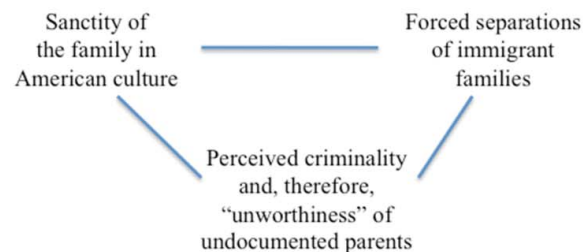


Figure 1B

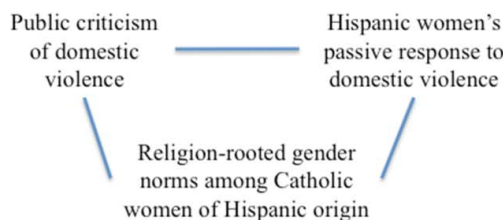


Figure 1C

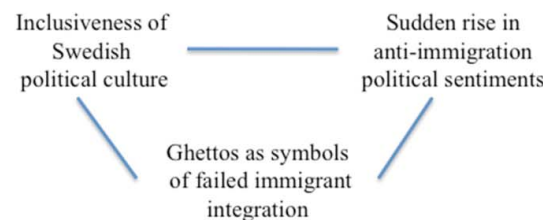


Figure 1D

Figure 1. The conceptual triangle.

Sinatra 2010). Research has shown that concept maps are associated with increased knowledge retention and stronger critical thinking (Nesbit and Adespoen 2006; Harris and Zha 2013). Sociologists have advocated for using concept maps as a way to teach complex ideas or to reach students from diverse backgrounds (Roberts and Roberts 2008; Trepagnier 2002); writing instructors have frequently used them in pre-writing exercises to help students organize their thoughts (see Al-Shaer 2014; Ojima 2006). As Trepagnier's (2002) work on concept maps in sociology courses makes clear, concept mapping shows that "when an idea is linked to another idea, a third original idea [often] results" (109).

What follows is the overview of one pedagogical technique that uses concept maps to help students generate their own arguments, which one of the authors has employed in a writing-intensive freshman seminar on immigration. We call this technique a *conceptual triangle*—a simple concept map aiming to identify and organize a research-worthy idea through a set of three steps concerning three interconnected ideas.

Figure 1A depicts the logical structure of the triangle and Figures 1B–1D provide examples from actual student papers. To build a conceptual triangle, we ask students to identify a general pattern in their data or primary sources, an inconsistency within them, and an explanation for that inconsistency. These three steps correspond to the three points of the triangle labeled "General pattern," "Inconsistency," and "Explanation" in Figure 1A. The technique draws out the connections among the three points as a means to distill an original, well-motivated argument from a seemingly broad and descriptive topic.

In an undergraduate classroom where the conceptual triangle may seem very new, this exercise should be introduced early on and then returned to throughout the semester. For graduate students, the triangle could serve as a tool to spot-check the argument of works-in-progress. In its most basic form, this lesson could take about 30 minutes of class time, but for longer projects, students might return to and revise their conceptual triangles several times as new research shifts their arguments. This technique could also be applied across a variety of learning contexts. For example:

- mapping out the triangle to uncover the research problem in an assigned reading or a model essay;
- developing a tentative conceptual triangle at the proposal stage of the writing process as a homework or as an in-class exercise;
- drawing a conceptual triangle based on one's own drafts to facilitate the revision process;

- applying the technique to peers' essays to help other writers recognize diverging interpretations of their arguments;
- using the technique as a way to begin and facilitate group discussions.

Across this variety of uses, the technique calls for the same steps, which we explain next.

Step 1: Identify general patterns, themes, or trends in the data

The first step in developing an original argument, and the conceptual triangle, is to examine a phenomenon of interest and to identify its major patterns and trends, whether in pre-assigned sources or through research. The theme emerging from this exploration is labeled "General pattern" in the triangle. Figures 2–4 provide three examples of this starting point in actual students' papers: the sanctity of family in American culture, public criticism of domestic violence, and the inclusiveness of Swedish political culture. These themes are a reflection of general trends and patterns derived from the students' own research. Importantly, these themes are open enough for further investigation, yet narrow enough—compared to more ambiguous terms like "American culture," "domestic violence," or "political culture"—to motivate a more focused work.

Step 2: Identify an inconsistency in the data

Once students have determined the general phenomenon for their study, we invite them to take the second step and identify a concrete problem, contradiction, or puzzling relationship within it (labeled "Inconsistency" in Figure 1A). This is essentially the source of the essay's research problem. In an essay depicted in Figure 1B, for example, a student was puzzled by the forced separations of immigrant families, *despite* the sanctity of the family in American culture. In the essay depicted in Figure 1C, the student aimed to explain why Hispanic-origin women were less likely to report domestic violence and leave abusive relationships, *despite* widespread public criticism of domestic violence. Similarly, Figure 1D presents the conceptual triangle from a paper concerned with a sudden rise in anti-immigration political sentiments, *despite* the generally inclusive political culture of Sweden.

Obviously, "General pattern" and "Inconsistency" could be observed and articulated simultaneously or even in the reverse order. Research often begins with a singular observation of something surprising in the data or in daily life, and only then articulates what was expected instead. Moreover, the two points could correspond not only to the divergence between the expected

and the observed, but also to two competing perspectives on the same issue—as, for example, between opponents and proponents of immigration. What is crucial, then, is not the order of discovery during the research process, but a precise distinction between “General pattern” and “Inconsistency” when these discoveries get written up. That precision, we suggest, could be reached by rooting both parts of the research problem in concrete evidence, rather than in personal opinions or speculation about how the world ought to be.

More than just being clearly defined, the two parts of an effective research problem also need to be “parallel”—that is, they need to relate to one specific phenomenon, process, or idea and describe what is generally expected about it and what is actually observed. This parallel structure allows students to develop genuine motivating questions that ultimately define the direction of their arguments. More specifically, the explicit divergence between “General pattern” and “Inconsistency” naturally leads to the question “Why? What explains this inconsistency, given the usual trend?” Thus, an effective research problem, established with relevant evidence, can generate arguments that directly address the kinds of “so what?” questions discussed at the start of this essay.

Step 3: Identify an explanation through research and analysis of evidence

After establishing a genuine question, students are asked to tentatively answer it. By requiring that the thesis adds a third theme—“Explanation”—the logic of the conceptual triangle ensures that research problem and thesis are logically connected and conceptually distinct and that the paper indeed produces an answer to the research question, rather than extends the description of the phenomenon already illuminated by that question. Moreover, it ensures that the thesis could be tested and argued against. Since the third point in the triangle could be any explanation relevant to the research problem, the students can try several ideas and test several alternative explanations as they draft and refine their conceptual triangles, and then choose one that they find most promising or interesting.

To illustrate this point, we return to student arguments. In an argument in Figure 1B, the student proposed that forced separations of immigrant families—despite otherwise pro-family American values—were due to perceptions of undocumented parents as criminals and, therefore, “unworthy” parents; by extension, their families were also viewed as families “less worthy” of being preserved. An argument depicted in Figure 1C proposed that the religiosity of Hispanic women, and the gender norms implied by that religiosity, partly

explained why Hispanic women in the United States were more likely to stay in abusive relationships and less likely to seek help—despite widespread public criticism of domestic violence. Finally, Figure 1D depicts an argument motivated by a question: Why and how did anti-immigrant sentiments begin to emerge in otherwise inclusive Sweden? Based on the analysis of evidence, the student proposed that this shift in political attitudes was due to an increased public awareness about ghettos and the Swedish Democrats’ ability to marshal those ghettos as symbols (and proof) of failed immigrant integration.

Looking ahead: Writing the argument

The three steps of the conceptual triangle define the logic of an argument; they are, however, not yet a complete argument. The question of how conceptual triangles translate into actual prose—at the sentence and paragraph levels—remains. To illustrate this transformation, we include here the actual motivating question and thesis sentences from the essay depicted in Figure 1C, and map out the logical structure of that argument:

- *Motive*: “If American culture stresses the significance of religion, and by extension family, how can they willingly allow the separation of so many children from their parents, especially when most of the children remain at an age when they heavily depend on their parents’ support?”
- *Thesis*: “For the undocumented parents, their legal status and social perception as criminals create simultaneous processes by which they are excluded and rejected from American society; at the same time, their label as criminals render them as incapable of being good parents from the point of view of the American public. Unfortunately, their status leads not only to their deportation, but also to the end of their custody rights. In the best interest of the children, who are most likely American citizens by birth-right, the government gives the children permission to stay, leading inevitably to a separated family.”

It is quite usual in academic writing that the research problem and thesis statement appear early in the paper—often in the abstract and introductory paragraphs—to orient the reader to the possible direction of the argument. Naturally, the motive is established first, beginning with “General pattern” and then turning to “Inconsistency.” In our example, the student first established the sanctity of the family in American culture and then showed that immigrant families are still forced to separate. The research process had turned up enough relevant evidence to support the two initial observations, thus convincing the writer that there is *indeed* an inconsistency—a genuine puzzle—worth writing about.

Once the research problem was established, the writer considered the insufficiency of existing explanations and then turned to the thesis part of the paper—a proportionally longer one—and developed it as a progression of logical steps, each supported with or developed through the analysis of evidence. The argument depicted in Figure 1C took three such steps. First, it established the relationship between immigrants' legal status and perceived criminality. Then, it showed how the perceived criminality of the undocumented immigrants triggered the perceptions of their families as "unworthy." Finally, it explained how these perceptions made forced separations of undocumented immigrant families seem more justifiable, despite American pro-family rhetoric. Although the number of steps in the thesis depends on the logic of the argument, and some thesis statements may be much shorter than this one, the thesis' last step would inevitably and directly answer the motivating question raised by the first two points of the conceptual triangle.

Implications

It is important to acknowledge that we have not conducted a systematic evaluation of the proposed technique. Nonetheless, the technique is fully grounded in practice. On the one hand, it emerged out of patterns that we noticed across the many draft conferences that we held with our students. At every individual conference, students and the instructor wrote down evidence relevant to the emerging puzzle and tentative thesis on a sheet of paper. Those notes consistently "crystallized" into a triangle, leading to the formulation of the technique. On the other hand, once the technique was established, we relied on two years of observations of the effectiveness of the technique in the context of a total of eight writing-intensive seminars.

Across those seminars, we observed immediate and noticeable improvement from drafts to revisions when the technique was first introduced. The students recognized that writing with a clearly articulated research problem was more challenging than writing without one: it required more time, careful and strategic consideration of available evidence, and creative logical thinking. Of course, on its own, the conceptual triangle technique could not help with the essay's actual content, and students had to reserve time to understand their sources and think their ideas through. Yet the technique made the question "what shall I write about?" more meaningful and manageable. As soon as tentative ideas began to shape up, the conceptual triangle technique became a helpful tool: knowing what their first step could be, students were able to start writing earlier, approached the

writing process in gradual steps, and produced original and cohesive arguments.

The simplicity and flexibility of the technique made it instrumental in the Research Unit of our seminars, when students had to simultaneously conduct their research and develop a theoretical argument—all in the course of just six weeks. Shuffling key themes across the three points of the triangle and visualizing alternative arguments helped students to articulate, track, and evaluate their emerging ideas thoroughly and efficiently. The technique also helped students to avoid simply summarizing their sources, and encouraged them instead to put sources to work in the service of their own original arguments. Finally, the students eagerly and actively used the technique not only for their own writing tasks, but also during in-class workshops. The technique seemed to provide a solid shared ground to carry on productive conversations about specific drafts, as well as academic writing in general.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed that teaching students to look for genuine puzzles in the data can help them identify legitimate scholarly motives and develop original arguments that effectively answer larger "so what?" questions. The conceptual triangle described here is a technique for that purpose. It demystifies the relationship between scholarly motive and thesis in an original argument, and is simple and flexible enough to be adapted across subject areas, data, and disciplines. This is true in writing-intensive classes, of course, but the conceptual triangle could also be used in non-writing intensive classes as a way of getting at the core of an argument that students have read and are discussing. Thus, the focus on the research problem in general, and the use of the conceptual triangle in particular, can be effective ways to help writers at all levels to develop original arguments that really matter.

References

- Abbott, A. 2004. *Methods of Discovery: Heuristics for the Social Sciences*. New York: Norton.
- Al-Shaer, I. M. R. 2014. "Employing Concept Mapping as a Pre-writing Strategy to Help EFL Learners Better Generate Argumentative Compositions." *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 8 (2).
- Asimov, I. 2014 [1959]. "On Creativity." *MIT Technology Review*, October 20, 2014, <http://www.technologyreview.com/view/531911/isaac-asimov-asks-how-do-people-get-new-ideas/>
- Booth, W. C., G. G. Colomb, & J. M. Williams. 2008. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Davies, M. 2010. "Concept Mapping, Mind Mapping and Argument Mapping: What are the Differences and Do They Matter?" *Higher Education* 62 (3): 279–301.
- Fernsten, L. A. & M. Reda. 2011. "Helping Students Meet the Challenges of Academic Writing." *Teaching in Higher Education* 16 (2), 171–82.
- Graff, G. & C. Birkenstein 2010. *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. 2nd Ed. New York: WW Norton & Company
- Harris, C. & S. Zha. 2013. "Concept Mapping: A Critical Thinking Technique." *Education* 134 (2): 207–11.
- Harvey, G. 1994. "Presence in the Essay." *College English* 56 (6): 642–54.
- Massengill, R. 2011. "Sociological Writing as Higher-level Thinking: Assignments that Cultivate the Sociological Imagination." *Teaching Sociology* 39 (4): 371–81.
- Nesbit, J. C. & O. O. Adesope. 2006. "Learning with Concept and Knowledge Maps: A Meta-analysis." *Review of Educational Research* 76 (3): 413–48.
- Novak, J. D. & A. J. Canas. 2006. "The Origins of the Concept Mapping Tool and the Continuing Evolution of the Tool." *Information Visualization* 5: 175–84.
- Ojima, M. 2006. "Concept Mapping as Pre-task Planning: A Case Study of Three Japanese ESL Writers." *System* 34 (4): 566–85.
- Roberts, K. A. 2011. "Imagine Deep Learning." *Michigan Sociological Review* 25: 1–18.
- Roberts, J. C. & K. A. Roberts. 2008. "Deep Reading, Cost/Benefit, and the Construction of Meaning: Enhancing Reading Comprehension and Deep Learning in Sociology Courses." *Teaching Sociology* 36 (2): 125–40.
- Sinatra, R. C. 2010. "Teaching Learners to Think, Read, and Write More Effectively in Content Subjects." *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas* 73 (5): 266–73.
- Sommers, N. & L. Saltz. 2004. "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year." *College Composition and Communication* 56 (1): 124–49.
- Trepagnier, B. 2002. "Mapping Sociological Concepts." *Teaching Sociology* 30 (1): 108–19.