**Entering a Research Conversation**

You’ve been assigned to write a research paper. Where to begin?

Well, the first step is probably to see it as an opportunity, not just a school assignment. Make the research really mean something by thinking about your answers to these questions: What are you interested in? What do you want to learn more about?

Here’s an example of a topic that interests me: I try to eat healthy foods, but I get confused when I read nutrition labels. My cereal box says “all natural” on the front and then lists twelve unrecognizable ingredients on the nutrition label—with only one or two that I can actually confirm are good for me.

So then I wonder, Is what I’m buying actually healthy? What’s so hard about making the label accurate and easy to read? And what’s the purpose of these labels if they are more confusing than informative?

It’s a good idea to start firing off a bunch of questions about the topic.

Should I care whether something is organic or all natural? What’s the difference?

Are the unrecognizable ingredients listed in nutritional labels actually healthy? How can food produced in a laboratory be healthy?

Are these labels regulated? If so, by whom? Can companies make any claims they want about their food products?

Why are food labels so complicated? Would clearer labels motivate people to buy healthy food?

Do food labels inform or confuse consumers?

Your questions are a good place to begin. Do you see a pattern to the questions? Which question seems the most focused or interesting?

Pick one or two questions and start looking for sources to see if others are asking similar questions; see what kinds of conversations others are having about the topic. The sources you find are real people having a real debate. And where do you enter the conversation? That’s next.

If I start exploring food labeling, I’ll find articles, government reports, blogs, and so forth written by industry analysts, politicians, maybe nutritionists. They often look at the same evidence but they come up with different conclusions or recommendations. A conversation starts because those in it come from different perspectives. They present conflicting evidence and probably dispute each other’s recommendations. Alliances form, too—with some sources citing the works of others.

As you read these sources, try to figure out is who’s most respected in the conversation. Who is being quoted and whose work is most often cited?

Quite often in debates people are taking extremes, but often there’s a question that hasn’t been asked, or details that have been ignored.. Often that’s a way into the conversation.

To enter a research conversation, ask these questions:

**What kinds of conversations are happening?** For most topics, you’ll find that there are many broad conversations going on. But within the broader conversation there are many focused conversations. The conversation about nutrition, for example, is a big one—I wanted to get specific, so I chose the topic of food labels because it’s a smaller conversation. Depending on the points of views of the people in the conversation, the positions they’ve taken, and the evidence analyzed, each individual will likely define the conversation differently.

**Who is in the conversation?**  Who are the major writers or thinkers in the debate? What gives them the authority to speak? Try doing a search of the last names of a few scholars in the field to determine who has been cited most often.

**Where is the conversation happening?**  In the popular media? In Congress? In scholarly articles? Look for a range of perspectives and a variety of sources.

**Where are the gaps and entry points in the conversation?**  Pay attention to the questions that haven’t been asked and evidence that has been overlooked.  Find out what’s been written, but also what’s missing, and locate entry points for your insights and ideas—and let the conversation begin.