


Slide 1

**Beginning the Process:  
Discovering and Focusing  
Topics**  
ORSSP Research Design and Data Analysis Lab

  
Dr. Marcus Hensel

Slide 2

**Topics**

**Session Overview**

- What are topics ?
- Two constraints on topics (and why to love them)
- Finding a topic
- Focusing your topic—why you must
- Focusing your topic—how to
- Next steps

Slide 3

**Topics**

**Session Overview**

- What are topics ?
- Two constraints on topics (and why to love them)
  - **Real Talk #1**
- Finding a topic
  - **Real Talk #2**
- Focusing your topic—why you must
- Focusing your topic—how to
  - **Real Talk #3**
- Next steps

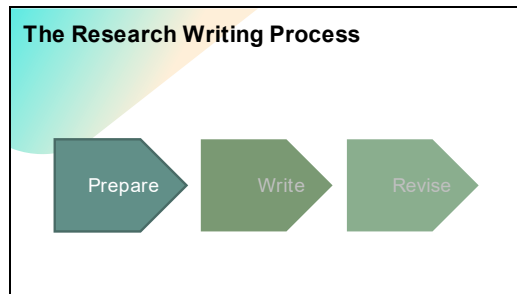
Slide 4

### Topics

#### Session Overview

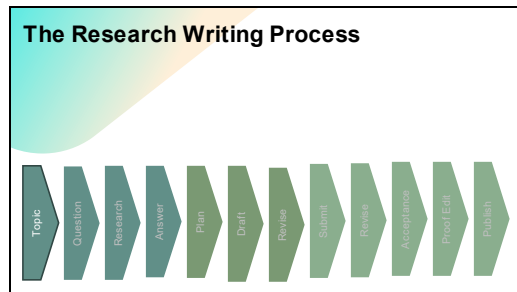
- What are topics ?
  - **Zoom poll**
- Two constraints on topics (and why to love them)
  - **Zoom poll (2)**
- Finding a topic
  - **Zoom poll**
  - **Interactive: finding your topic (chat)**
- Focusing your topic—why you must
- Focusing your topic—how to
  - **Zoom poll**
  - **Interactive: finding your topic (chat storm)**
- Next steps

Slide 5



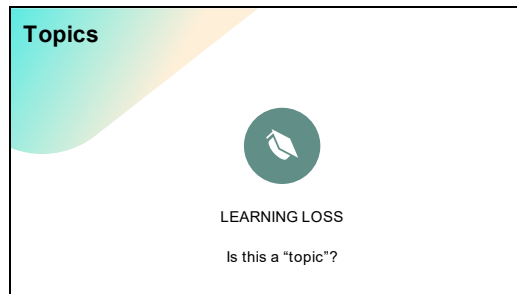
Research writing is a 3-phase process; we're focused on the Preparation phase today

Slide 6



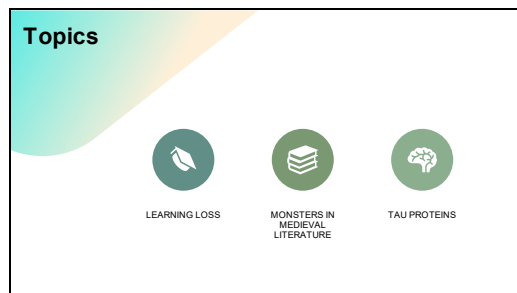
It is, in fact, the very first element of any research project

Slide 7



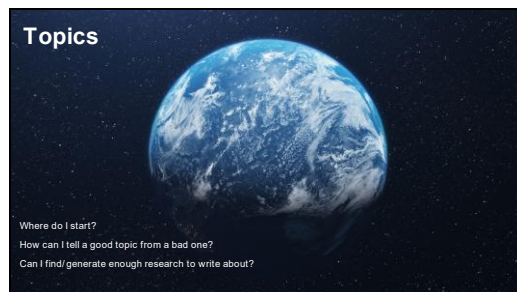
Ask yourself: "Is this a 'topic' as I understand the definition of the word?"

Slide 8



It turns out, yes it is a topic and no it isn't. It *is* a topic, but one so broad as to become impossible to work on.

Slide 9




Topics are almost infinite; but this freedom does scare people from time to time

Slide 10

**Topics**

1) a topic must be impactful and have an audience



Constraint #1: Impact

Slide 11

**Topics: Impact**

  
LEARNING LOSS

  
MONSTERS IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

  
TAU PROTEINS


Which of these topics are the most impactful? Least?

Rank these topics from most to least impactful.

Slide 12

**Topics**


2) a topic must be specific enough to be manageable in the time you have



Constraint #2: Scope/Manageability

Slide 13

**Topics: Scope**



LEARNING LOSS      MONSTERS IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE      TAU PROTEINS

Which of these topics is the narrowest in scope? Widest?

Rank these topics from narrowest to widest in scope.

Slide 14

**Topics**

Topic, from the Greek *topos* (τόπος) meaning "place," but figuratively "opportunity, possibility."

Little, Henry George, and Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. Clarendon Press, 1940.

Your topic centers you in a place (your subject) but is also an opportunity to raise questions that need to be answered.

Slide 15

**Topics: Grazing**



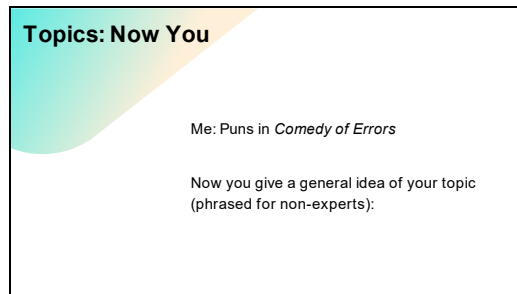
Grazing: undirected research

Slide 16



Maybe you can't get past "macroeconomics," so skim through the latest articles in leading economics journals to try to see what the areas of argument seem to be; go to introductory resources to get a sense of what's going on. These aren't things that you're going to cite, necessarily, but they help get you pointed in the right direction

Slide 17



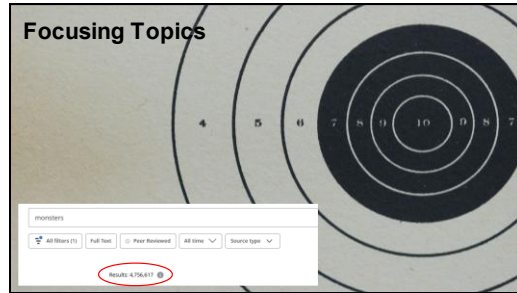
Generate a very general, short description of your topic.

Slide 18



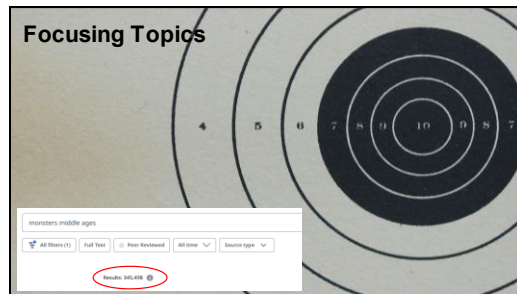
Good, workable topics cannot be stated in a few words.

Slide 19



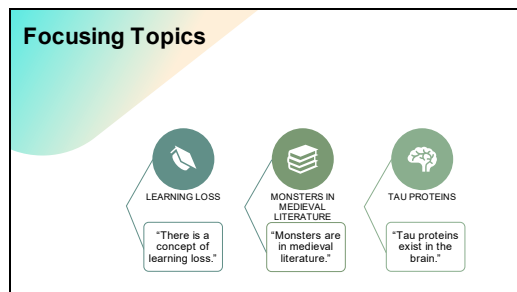
If I spent 1 second looking at each hit, it would take me 55 days to get through every source on monsters

Slide 20



If I spent 1 second looking at each hit, it would take me almost 4 days to get through every source on monsters

Slide 21



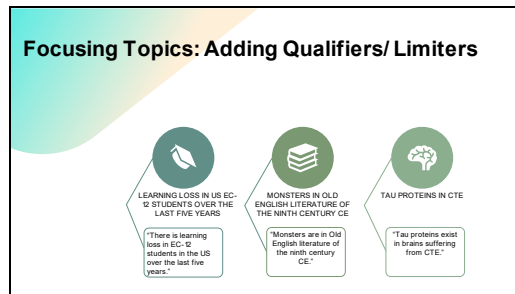
When you're thinking about your topic, you want to turn it into the "elevator pitch" sentence... If we did that for each of these, we'd get sentences that don't really do anything except restate an accepted fact

Slide 22



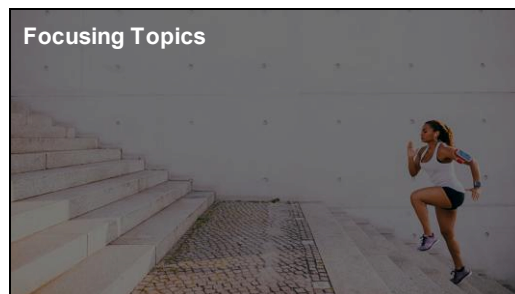
Learning loss and Monsters topics narrow the scope geographically (in the US) and temporally (9<sup>th</sup> century); tau proteins narrows the scope to a particular brain pathology/disease (so not Alzheimer's)

Slide 23



Adding qualifiers/limiters is not enough. Remake the sentences, and we see that they're still restatements.

Slide 24



We need action in order to take our topic somewhere.

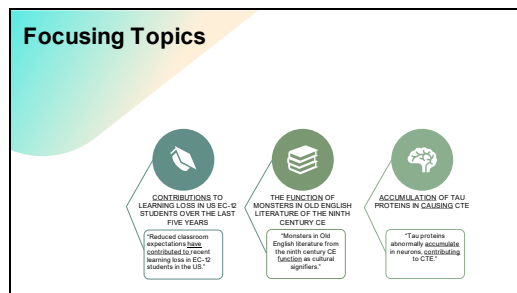


Slide 25



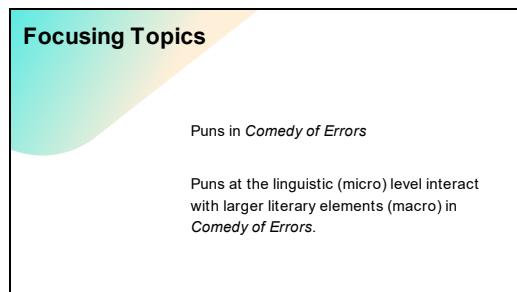
And that action means we need to add verbs/verbals.

Slide 26



The new elevator pitches have action: **contribute, function, accumulate/contribute**

Slide 27



Here's my own example

Slide 28

**Focusing Topics: Now You**

Now you: take that general topic, and give it some action

Now you take that general topic you've generated and give it some action

Slide 29

**Focusing Topics**

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO LEARNING LOSS IN US K-12 STUDENTS OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS**

"Reduced classroom expectations significantly contributed to learning loss in K-12 students in the US."

**Learning loss and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review of evidence**

Published in International Journal of Educational Development, May 2021  
Reviewed by: Cochrane  
By: #KatieGray, #NewHobbyHobby, #NewHobbyHobby, #NewHobbyHobby, #NewHobbyHobby

**A meta-analysis of students' academic learning losses over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Published in Learning and Instruction, August 2021  
Reviewed by: Springer  
By: #Boudier, #Boudier, #Boudier, #Boudier, #Boudier, #Boudier, #Boudier, #Boudier, #Boudier, #Boudier

**Perspectives of two principals: how to mitigate learning loss in turnaround schools**

Published in Promoting School Success, 2021  
Reviewed by: Springer  
By: #Taylor, #Taylor, #Taylor, #Taylor, #Taylor, #Taylor, #Taylor, #Taylor, #Taylor, #Taylor

**Revisiting, Reframing and Recovering Learning Loss: An Arched Impression on Primary Education During Covid Epoch**

Published in Education & Culture Inquiry, 2021  
Reviewed by: Springer  
By: #Jain, #Jain, #Jain, #Jain, #Jain, #Jain, #Jain, #Jain, #Jain, #Jain

Now it's time to do some initial research, but there's more direction/narrowness

Going through learning loss articles, I'd interested in causation—so any article talking about solutions is going to mention causation (and hopefully directly cite studies on causation)

Slide 30

**Focusing Topics**

**THE FUNCTION OF MONSTERS IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE NINTH CENTURY CE**

"Monsters in Old English literature from the ninth century CE function as cultural signifiers."

**Monster Theory: Reading Culture**

Published in: MLA  
Reviewed by: MLA  
By: #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter

**THE GRENDLEIN AND THE POLITICS OF SUCCESSION AT REBOL: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MONSTERS IN REBOL**

Published in: Studies in English Literature, 2018  
Reviewed by: Studies in English Literature  
By: #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter

**The Old English Alexander's Letter to Aristotle: Monsters and Hybrids in the Service of Exemplarity**

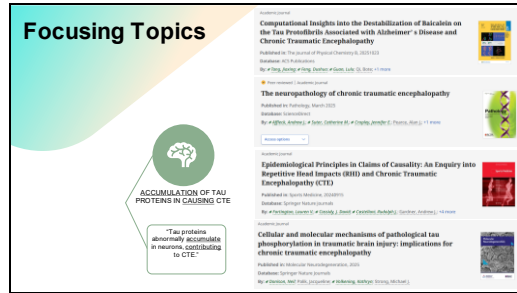
Published in: English Literature, 2018  
Reviewed by: English Literature  
By: #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter

**Reading Grendel's Mother**

Published in: New Readings in Old English and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture  
Reviewed by: New Readings in Old English and Early Medieval English Literature and Culture  
By: #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter, #Carter

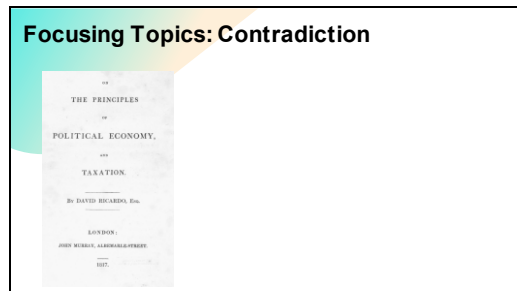
Here, I'd be looking at OE literature, but also cultural studies of monsters

Slide 31



Here, I'd look at Tau proteins, CTE pathology, and anything that combines those two ideas

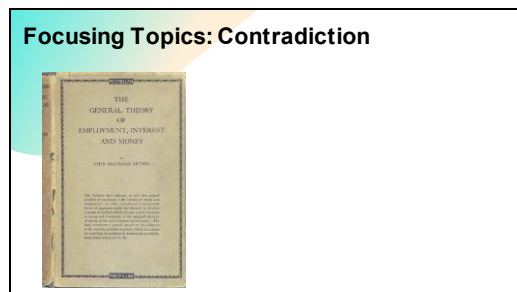
Slide 32



Finding that niche is not always easy, but there are three approaches you can take to help.

Take a walk with me through the history of macroeconomics! Classical economics reigned from the late 1700s into the 1900s, exemplified by David Ricardo, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, etc.

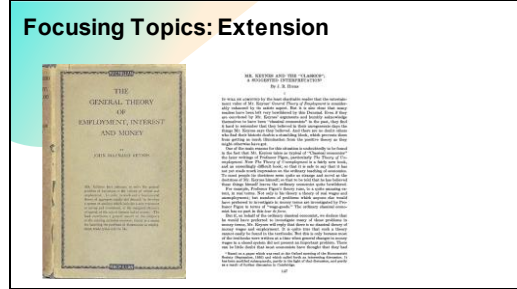
Slide 33



Contradiction: John Maynard Keynes read classical economics, rejected it, and created his own macroeconomic model that virtually the previous model.

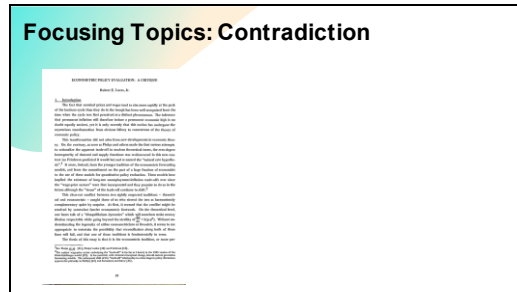
Maybe you read something and the conclusions are all wrong, the priors are wrong, the study was incomplete in some significant way, etc. That can be your niche: it's a contradiction starting point.

Slide 34



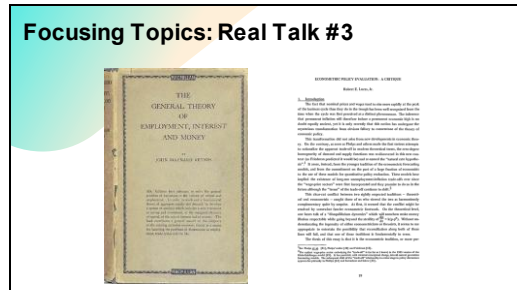
Extension: J.R. Hicks and Alvin Hansen read Keynes, loved it, and extended/developed it. You read something and it's so great that you're hooked, and you want to add to the work that's already been done or apply it in a different direction. That can be your niche: it's an extending starting point.

Slide 35



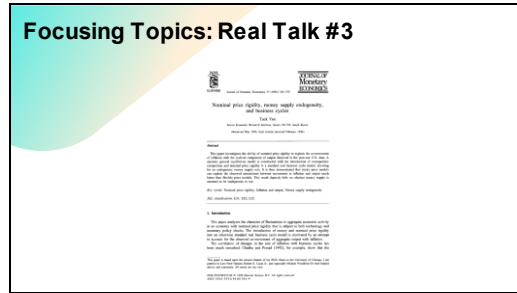
Contradiction: The Keynesian model lost its shine with Robert Lucas's critique, which helped usher in the New Classical models in 1976.

Slide 36



Synthesis: what if you could take the parts of Keynesian models that work well and the parts of New Classical models that work well and mash them up to create something new?

Slide 37

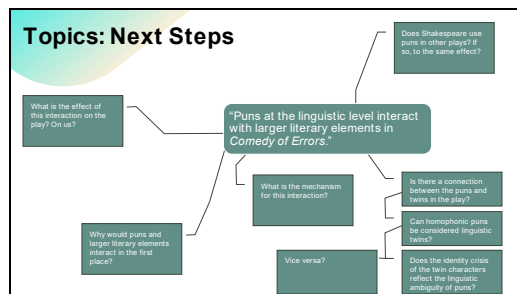


Synthesis: in the 1990s, people like Tack Yun started returning to Keynesian ideas with elements from new classical models, creating New Keynesian macroeconomics

Slide 38



Slide 39



Good, focused topics almost generate questions by themselves: they lead a curious person to ask questions that don't have easy or obvious answers—questions that no one else might have asked before

Slide 40

