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**Beginning the Process:  
Discovering and Focusing  
Topics**

ORSSP Research Design and Data Analysis Lab



Dr. Marcus Hensel

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**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

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**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

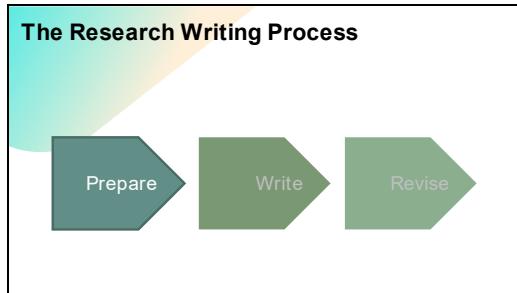
## Slide 4

**Topics**

Session Overview

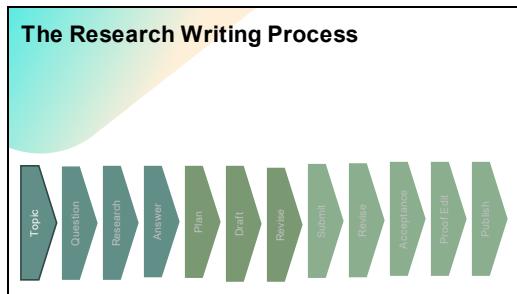
- What are topics ?
  - Zoom poll
- Two constraints on topics (and why to love them)
  - Zoom poll (2)
- Finding a topic
  - Zoom poll
  - Interactive: finding your topic (chat)
- Focusing your topic—why you must
  - Zoom poll
  - Interactive: finding your topic (chat storm)
- Next steps

## Slide 5



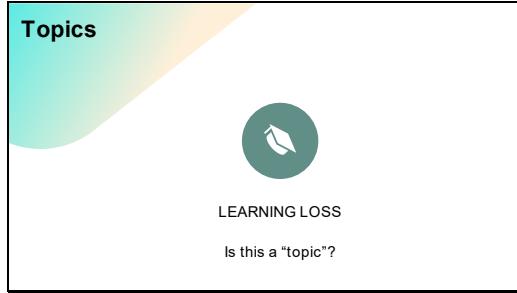
Research writing is a 3-phase process; we're focused on the Preparation phase today

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

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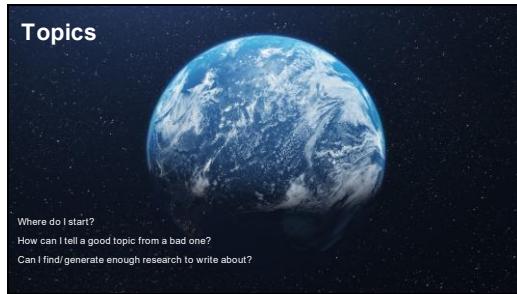
Ask yourself: “Is this a ‘topic’ as I understand the definition of the word?”

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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.

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

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**Topics**

1) a topic must be impactful and have an audience



Constraint #1: Impact

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**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.

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**Topics**

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



Constraint #2: Scope/Manageability

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#### 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.

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#### Topics

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

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

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

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#### Topics: Grazing

Grazing: undirected research

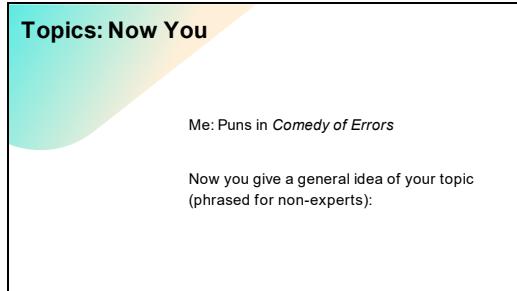


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Maybe you can't get past "macroeconomics," so skim through the latest articles in leading economics journals to try to see what the areas of argument seem to be; go to introductory resources to get a sense of what's going on. These aren't things that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

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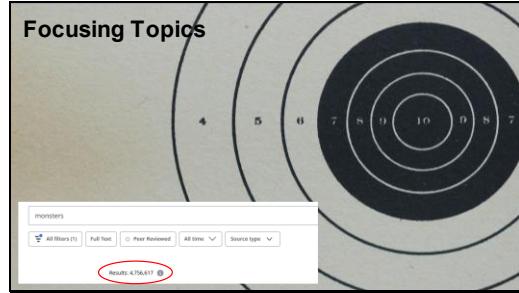
Generate a very general, short description of your topic.

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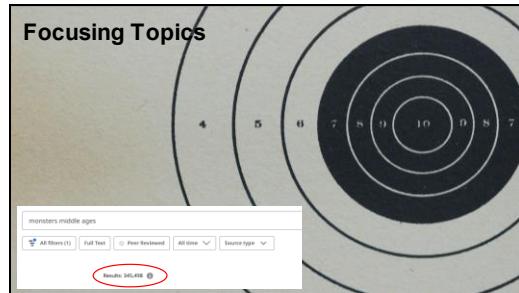
Good, workable topics cannot be stated in a few words.

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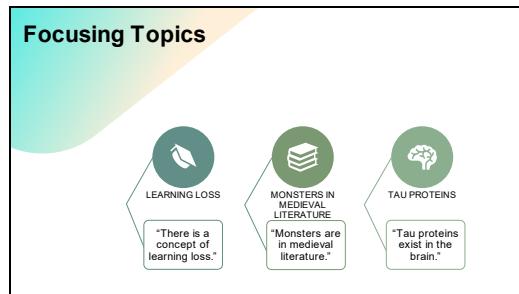
If I spent 1 second looking at each hit, it would take me 55 days to get through every source on monsters

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

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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

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**Focusing Topics: Adding Qualifiers/ Limiters**

LEARNING LOSS IN US EC-  
12 STUDENTS OVER THE  
LAST FIVE YEARS

MONSTERS IN OLD  
ENGLISH LITERATURE OF  
THE NINTH CENTURY CE

TAU PROTEINS IN CTE

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)

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**Focusing Topics: Adding Qualifiers/ Limiters**

LEARNING LOSS IN US EC-  
12 STUDENTS OVER THE  
LAST FIVE YEARS

"There is learning  
loss in EC-12  
students in the US  
over the last five  
years."

MONSTERS IN OLD  
ENGLISH LITERATURE OF  
THE NINTH CENTURY CE

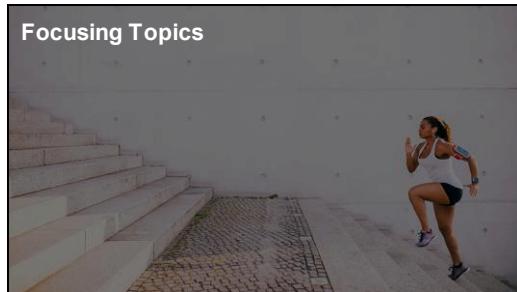
"Monsters are in Old  
English literature of the  
ninth century CE."

TAU PROTEINS IN CTE

"Tau proteins exist  
in brains suffering  
from CTE."

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

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We need action in order to take our topic somewhere.

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**Focusing Topics**

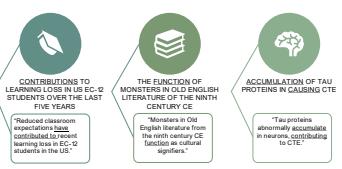


CONTRIBUTIONS TO LEARNING LOSS IN US EC-12 STUDENTS OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS  
THE FUNCTION OF MONSTERS IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE NINTH CENTURY CE  
ACCUMULATION OF TAU PROTEINS IN CAUSING CTE

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

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**Focusing Topics**



CONTRIBUTIONS TO LEARNING LOSS IN US EC-12 STUDENTS OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS  
"Reduced classroom expectations have contributed to learning loss in EC-12 students in the US."

THE FUNCTION OF MONSTERS IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE OF THE NINTH CENTURY CE  
"Monsters in Old English literature often serve as a function as cultural signifiers."

ACCUMULATION OF TAU PROTEINS IN CAUSING CTE  
"Tau proteins abnormally accumulate in neurons contributing to CTE."

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

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**Focusing Topics**

Puns in *Comedy of Errors*

Puns at the linguistic (micro) level interact with larger literary elements (macro) in *Comedy of Errors*.

Here's my own example

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# Focusing Topics: Now You

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

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**Focusing Topics**

- Learning loss and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review of evidence**  
Published in *International Journal of Educational Development*, May 2022.  
Bookend: [Suzanne H. Raskin](#), [Alyssa M. Gagnon](#), [Ethan Fox](#), [Alden](#)
- A meta-analysis of estimated academic learning losses over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic**  
Published in [Frontiers in Psychology](#), April 2022.  
Bookend: [Danielle S. Hustedt](#), [Alyssa M. Gagnon](#), [Ethan Fox](#), [Alden](#)
- Contributions to learning loss in US EC-12 students over the last five years**  
Published in *Elementary School Journal*, 2023.  
Bookend: [Alyssa M. Gagnon](#), [Ethan Fox](#), [Alden](#), [Grayce A. L.](#), [Kathleen M. Hustedt](#)
- Perspectives of two principals how to mitigate learning loss in turnaround schools**  
Published in *Elementary School Journal*, 2023.  
Bookend: [Alyssa M. Gagnon](#), [Ethan Fox](#), [Alden](#), [Grayce A. L.](#), [Kathleen M. Hustedt](#)
- Revisiting, Reframing and Recovering Learning Loss: An Arched Impression on Primary Education During Covid-Epoch**  
Published in *Education & Urban Society*, March 2023.  
Bookend: [Alyssa M. Gagnon](#), [Ethan Fox](#), [Alden](#), [Grayce A. L.](#), [Kathleen M. Hustedt](#)

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)

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# Focusing Topics



The FUNCTION OF MONSTERS IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE (Ninth CENTURY CE)  
"Monsters in Old English literature from Viking to Anglo-Saxon culture and its signifiers."

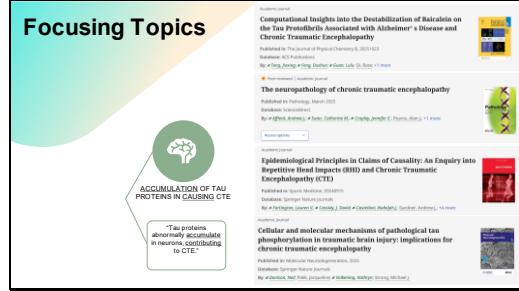
Book  
**Monster Theory : Reading Culture**  
Published in 1995  
Database: Humanities E-Journals  
by Gérard, Jefferys  
[View details](#)

Book  
**HOBOT! THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MONSTERS IN BEOWULF**  
Published in 2000  
Database: Early English Manuscript Survey: Manuscripts of English Authors, 2000  
Database: Early Manuscript Manuscripts Resource  
by J. Douglas, John

Book  
**The Old English Alexander's Letter to Aristotle : Monsters and Hybris in the Service of Exemplarity**  
Published in English Studies, 001317  
Database: Humanities Full Text (With Webs)  
by E. G. Coker

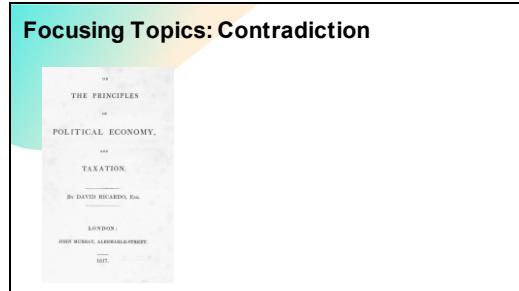
Here, I'd be looking at OE literature, but also cultural studies of monsters

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

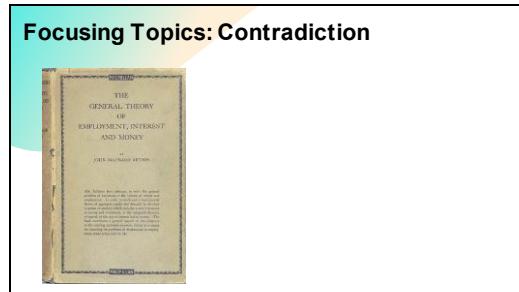
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Finding that niche is not always easy, but there are three approaches you can take to help.

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.

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

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## Focusing Topics: Extension



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.

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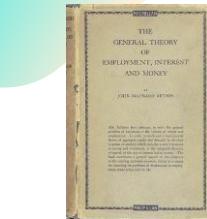
## Focusing Topics: Contradiction



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

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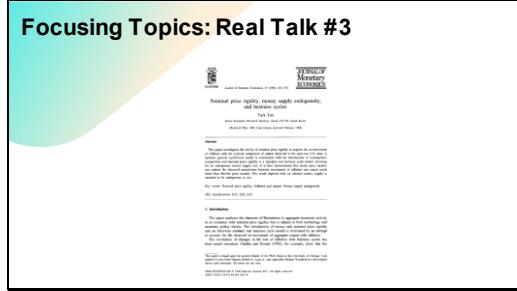
## Focusing Topics: Real Talk #3



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?

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**Focusing Topics: Real Talk #3**



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

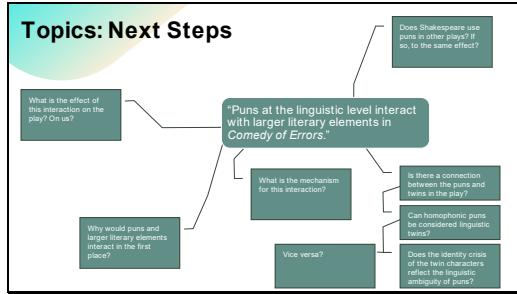
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**Topics: Next Steps**



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**Topics: Next Steps**



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

