

Building Informative Presentations and Documents

To create an informative presentation or document, you have to investigate and analyze a topic. One method of doing this is to ask a series of questions about a given subject. Below, we have listed a set of general questions you can ask to structure the effort and refine your analysis. These questions are derived from a system of topics (called *topoi*) used in classical rhetoric.

Answer the questions listed below to generate *a map of the territory*.

Topoi Method

Who?

Who is he or she?

Who is responsible?

Who did it?

To whom was it done?

Who is in favor of it?

Who is against it?

Identify your audience, experts in the field, and others who are affected by the topic.

Define roles, examine political issues and economic concerns, and list sources of information about the topic.

What?

What is it?

What are its parts?

What is it like?

What is it different from?

What does it do?

What are some examples?

What should we do?

What should we avoid doing?

What does it look like?

Describe the subject matter, what it is you are attempting to document or present. Cover all significant aspects, elements or steps, with notes and links to sources. Create summaries, consider the topic from different perspectives, and think about what images you might use to illustrate the topic.

If the topic is matter of debate, identify the arguments pro and con, and what's at stake.

Why?

Why use it?

Why do it?

Why did it happen?

Why did it not happen?

Why do people care about it?

Describe the motivation for people's interest in the topic.

Define any goals or activities related to the subject, or why people might avoid them

When?

When did it happen?

When will it occur?

When should it be done?

When did it begin?

When did it (or will it) end?

Identify any timelines for acting on the topic. Describe the history of the subject, coordination issues or patterns, and any activities that occur before or after.

Where?

Where did it come from?
Where is it going?
Where is it now?

Describe any physical locations related to the topic, including where it started and where it may occur in the future.

How?

How does it work?
How is it used?
How do you do it?
How do you operate it?
How is it organized?

Describe how people engage in or support the topic.

List any steps or instructions. If there is a formal process, identify who governs it.

So What?

What does it mean?
What is important about it?
Who cares?
What will it do for people?
Why should I care?

Identify the points of relevance for the audience.

Describe any principles, objectives and goals which the topic serves.

Answering the questions above should give you enough raw material to create a working draft of your presentation or document. To organize your material, use the following outline:

- 1. Purpose:** Identify your goal, your audience and any limitations.
- 2. Overview:** Describe the body of your material at a high level.
- 3. Main Topics:** Cover each major point, and list key details for each sub-topic.
- 4. Summation:** Present any conclusions at a high level and any call to action.
- 5. References:** List sources, definitions of key terms and contacts.

The preceding methods have been used for generations to produce documents and presentations. One pitfall to avoid, however, is confusing the map with the territory: the outline or *map* is not the *territory* of the finished product. High level outlines are easy to generate; filling in the details, editing, and revising is a lot of *work*.

Bonus Formula

Information = Factuality + Comprehensiveness + Surprise

- Factuality – Is it true?
- Comprehensiveness – Does it tell us everything we need to know?
- Surprise – Does it tell us something we don't already know?