Course Warmup: Question at Issue

In the example of stasis in the last section, you have reached a point of disagreement—stasis—with one or more members of your discourse community. This point of disagreement will now generate one or more questions at issue. Let’s go back to the original example. You and a classmate disagree about the benefit and cost of Utah’s English Only Law, so the question at issue may be "Is the English Only Law a good idea?" Or it may be "What will be the fiscal effects of the English Only Law?" Or perhaps "Does the benefit from the tax savings generated by the English Only Law outweigh the social costs?"

It is important to note a few things here. First, one point of stasis—disagreement over this law—can generate several questions at issue. Stasis is the point at which you disagree. Question at issue is a question generated by that point. Second, once you know what is at issue for your community, you have a starting point for your paper. You no longer have to worry about a topic because you have a specific direction. But now the hard part begins. You need to start conducting inquiry.

Inquiry means an honest look at the question at hand and the reasons available. What we are concerned with in this class is not winning, but finding the best possible conclusion from the available reasons. In other words, once you have the question, you have precisely that: the question. Don’t mistake it for the answer and don’t get caught up in trying to prove the person on the other side of the disagreement wrong. What you want to do now is learn more about the question and to come to an honest conclusion. Let’s go back to the example to demonstrate inquiry.

Say you selected the following question: Does the benefit from the tax savings generated by the English Only Law outweigh the social costs? You now need to do some
research, reading, and thinking. If you are going to answer this question, you need to find out what the tax savings will be, what the social costs might be. You need to then come up with a way of comparing them. To do this you might look at the readings provided in the class. You might need to go to the library or internet. You might need to talk to someone who moved to this country and for whom English isn’t a first language. You probably need to look in detail at the proposed law itself.

For this process to be true inquiry, you must enter it with an open mind— with a willingness to change your opinion. Winning the disagreement is not the point. The point of real inquiry is honestly attempting to come up with the best answer to the question from the available reasons. So, even though you may initially have an opinion on the English Only Law, you need to suspend that opinion until you get more information. Answer a few questions on question at issue and inquiry and then we will talk about the next step, thesis.

Answer questions | Next module