

Exercise 1: Disciplinary Lenses

This is an exercise I developed for first-year composition students but could be adapted to any undergraduate research project. The learning objectives stressed in the exercise are to identify potential stakeholders for a research issue and what aspects of the issue these stakeholders might be interested in. By this point in the semester, each student has an idea of a topic they would like to research, with the specification, in this case, that the issue affect the city of Milwaukee and its residents. However, the exercise could work around any research topic.

In this exercise, I first ask students to make a list of five different majors at the university and, if applicable, to include their own major. I encourage students to be diverse in their brainstorming, and not to include related fields. After a few minutes, I ask for volunteers to proffer their research issue and their list of disciplinary fields. From there, I write the issue, surrounded by a circle, and we mind-map aspects of the topic that each discipline might be interested in. After a few examples, I break students into small groups, and they repeat the activity.

The experience with this exercise has been very positive and we are always able to link a discipline, no matter how distant, to the research issue in some way. Students are surprised to see, for example, how a political science researcher might be interested in soil erosion, or how a finance major might find opportunities in researching police technology. The results of the exercise are always eye opening for students and the mind-mapping process is something I utilize throughout the semester, encouraging students to incorporate it into their own research.