

# TOP TIPS FOR HAVING CONVERSATIONS AND MANAGING TOPIC CHOICES FOR THE PIP

## Personal Interest Project

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### Syllabus Content

Students are to:

- develop a research proposal clearly outlining the topic, question or problem
- select appropriate concepts to ensure that the topic and the subsequent research relate to the Society and Culture course

### Syllabus Outcomes

- H4 assesses the interaction of personal experience and public knowledge in the development of social and cultural literacy

### Rationale

The following resource supports teachers in their role as a mentor through the PIP process. It provides tips and suggestions to help teachers effectively conduct and record meetings of early interactions with students where important discussions about topic choice will occur. It is hoped that some of these ideas can take the pressure out of the teacher's role, and empower them to interact confidently and making informed choices about student topic.

## Top Tips for having conversations and managing topic choices for the PIP

Having worked with many students through the PIP process, it is important that all time spent on the PIP is purposeful. Meeting regularly with students one on one can help to support this, and keep clear records of all conversations with students about topics for yourself. Below are a few tips that I have found helpful when engaging in early discussions with students about their ideas and topics.

### 1. Work with three ideas

Students can become consumed with ONE idea at the beginning of their topic development process. When a student approaches initial discussions with only one idea it can limit the value of these initial discussions if their selection is inappropriate or unethical. Students can leave these discussions feeling like they have no clue where to start, or how to refocus their ideas. They can feel unsupported (even though this is not likely the case!) because they might have invested in one idea that cannot be worked on further. They may choose to then ignore your advice and continue to spend time on work that will either not end up approved or remain inappropriate or unethical.

Thus, it can be helpful to instruct the students to work on three ideas before approaching you to discuss their potential topic- and really ensure you insist on it! Reassure them that the ideas don't need to be fully built-out, but that they should be distinct ideas. They might even bring an article, image or post that was the inspiration of the idea with them. Their initial meetings with you can then unpack and discuss each of these ideas.

The benefit of working with multiple initial ideas rather than one, allows you some flexibility when directing them on what might be their best potential ideas. You are essentially overcoming a lot of

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the potential troubles that can arise when students come to you with only one idea. In many cases some ideas might not be fully fleshed out and what the student sees as two separate ideas can actually be combined to create one more well rounded idea. It also opens up the opportunity for you to discount any unethical or inappropriate choices as you can redirect their focus to the merits of a more appropriate choice. Likely in a proposal of 3 ideas, there is one where you can focus the students for further development and all of your students can leave their discussions with you with some clear future direction.

### 2. Frame within the course – where does the topic belong?

Bring to your initial discussions a HARD COPY of the syllabus- and encourage them to bring their own copy, electronic or otherwise. When discussing the validity of their ideas, ensure you go straight into the syllabus- ideally the HSC content and concepts- and identify SPECIFIC areas that could help to direct and frame their ideas. If a student is looking at a topic around how gender is represented in K-Pop, then spend some time discussing specific areas of the course (dot points like how gender is constructed and deconstructed) and concepts or subject specific language (power, consumption, paraphernalia) which could provide focus and direction to their research and planning moving forward. Really reinforce the importance of using these areas as guiding principles for their ideas moving forward and show them the value of fully understanding the place of their work within the course. If they need to do some background reading on a particular depth study, then directing them to a textbook can be useful at this point.

### 3. Have your resources at hand

Just like having your syllabus with you for initial discussions, it is also important to have a few other things handy.

- **Your laptop.** A quick search of Google Scholar or *The Conversation* can quickly add validity and direction to a vague or unclear idea or topic. Let's say a student is interested in videos of people filming and posting kind or charitable acts on social media. A quick search of 'kindness psychology sociology social media' might reveal some more academic phrases like *altruism* or *performative activism* and *narcissistic altruism*.

The below image shows that a simple search of the conversation reveals 41 articles written by Academics, related topics which can also become further reading, top contributors and their contact details which can be contacted for primary research purposes or further examined for more detailed academic pieces. This process also models effective research skills with the students one on one, demonstrating how you can go from the vague idea to a more specific, meaty topic!

- **Sociology or Psychology Textbooks:** If you have kept your old university textbooks, or own other more detailed reference books then these can be good to bring along. You can look for more detail on concepts or ideas and the students can copy any relevant pages. An alternative is

The screenshot shows a search results page for 'Articles on Altruism'. The main content area displays a list of articles with titles, authors, and dates. Three articles are visible:

- September 19, 2022:** "What do we owe future generations? And what can we do to make their world a better place?" by Michael Noels, Australian Catholic University.
- June 13, 2022:** "Burned-out heroes: why bedside nurses should not have to be martyrs to be valued" by Rebecca Williams, LICJ.
- March 10, 2022:** "Will booking an Airbnb help Ukraine? Why people make counterproductive decisions about charity" by David Cooper, University of Stirling.

On the right side of the page, there are several sections:

- Related Topics:** A list of related topics including Charity, Cooperation, Coronavirus, COVID-19, Generosity, Giving, Kindness, Neuroscience, Philanthropy and nonprofits, and Psychology.
- Job Board:** A list of job openings, including Executive Director, Deputy Dean, Research Engineer, Deputy Dean, and Development Associate.
- Top contributors:** A list of top contributors, including Madeleine Beekman, Jo Cutler, and Steve Taylor.

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to have your initial meetings in the school library and to pull out some relevant reference books for yourself before the meeting commence. Student can then photocopy any relevant pages for themselves!

### 4. Don't spend too long 'brainstorming'

I don't spend weeks (or even too many lessons!) allowing for students to brainstorm topics freely. They often don't use this time well, and can spend weeks on ideas that are not going to validly inform their eventual topic. Your first fortnight of term 4 can be best used by having brainstorming time mixed with structured or guided activities where you model how to research and think about topics and ideas.

### 5. Validate creativity, encourage pragmatism

It is very important to validate the creativity in our students' ideas. Ideally, we want our student topics to be innovative and unique, and a level of creativity can be key to this. However, I think it is just as important to ensure that your students and yourselves remember not to fall too far into the creative and forget the pragmatic. Is their topic researchable? Can they fully explore their ideas in a secondary and primary way? Can they access a sample relevant to their topic? These really important questions can be the downfall of a really creative and unique idea which is not practical.

### 6. Ask lots and ask little

Ask lots of questions in your initial interview about the topics the students have chosen. Make sure that you are gauging both their own understanding of their ideas and getting an impression of what their intentions are with the topic. If the topic has promise, ensure that you are positive and reinforce their ideas and direction. However, with topics that are clearly unethical, be careful with asking too many questions and be careful of the type of questions you ask. If you feel like a topic is not feasible because of ethics, it is best to be direct and clear at the very start. Redirect, or make clear that the topic will not be approved. While they may be disappointed, it is much more palatable to accept a change to their direction early on, than to feel like there is a chance their topic will go ahead and then be disappointed later on.

### 7. Use the school structure (HODs and other school leadership)

When it comes to unethical or inappropriate topics, remember that you and the school have the final say in what topics they are permitted to do. It can be very hard to keep your Head of Department or other leadership involved with the topics very early on. Share your concerns with them about any of the students and their topics, and if needed, talk with the students Head of Year or Year Advisor. Sometimes, these people will be privy to more information about the student than you are, and can help you to make informed decisions about topics and how they might impact the student. A student who is finding it difficult to accept your concerns about their topic, will also be more likely to accept that their topic needs to change if it is communicated by yourself and other members of the school leadership. Remember that you do not have to have difficult conversations with the students on your own!

### 8. Start how you wish them to finish – rigorously!

Have high expectations of the students at all stages of the PIP process. This means, set high expectations of their topics from the beginning, and don't accept poor PIP proposals even if the topic is a good one. A poor PIP proposal can often indicate when a student has not fleshed out their idea, and has not completed sufficient background research into their topic- these are two things which are essential at the beginning of the process. Expect that they come to meetings with you prepared and having addressed any goals set from previous meetings. Modeling a rigorous approach to their work from the beginning shows the students that they need to work consistently towards their project if they want to succeed at a high level.