

The Common Topics

In antiquity, rhetoric often started with the common topics of invention. It is "invention" because you are making an inventory of what you know. And they are "topics" like a topographical map, showing you all the perspectives on a subject to think through.

Following is a way to look at the topics in five areas. The subject to think through has been replaced with "x." Insert your subject in its place. A sample use of the common topics follows on the next page.

Definition

- What do we mean by x?
- What are its parts?
- To what category of things does x belong?

Comparison

- How is x like y?
- How are they different?
- Are the differences in degrees or in kind? (Are these two things more of or less of something, or are they two different things all together?)

Relationship

- What is the relationship between x and z?
- What causes x? What effect does x have?
- If x occurs, what will be the results?
- If x occurs, what will not occur?

Circumstance

- What circumstances lead to x?
- When x is happening, what else is happening?
- What would make x possible? Probable? Impossible?

Testimony

- What do experts say about x? Witnesses?
- What do our past experiences tell us about x?

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A sample use of the topics from a Hip Socket client

A management team had been working on improving their organization on some specific fronts. Some members of the team had quietly observed that they weren't getting anywhere. Mark had a discussion around six "topical" questions about the word "progress."

- How would you define progress?
- What are the "parts" that make up progress?
- How does progress compare to action? Contrast?
- What is the relationship between planning and progress?
Planning and thinking?
- What are the circumstances that lead to progress?
- What past experiences have you had of a team making true progress? What did you witness?

It was one of the team's richest discussions to date—and it did not take up the entire meeting, either. The result was that the team identified two problem areas for themselves and came up with a plan to address them.

(In other words, they made progress!)

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