

Identifying Controversial Issues

While working on your research project you may uncover some issues on which people disagree. To decide on how to present an issue fairly, consider some questions you can ask yourself or others as you carry out your research.

1. What is the issue about?

Identify which type of controversy you have uncovered. Almost all controversy revolves around one or more of the following:

- Values—What should be? What is best?
- Information—What is the truth? What is a reasonable interpretation?
- Concepts—What does this mean? What are the implications?

2. What positions are being taken on the issue?

Determine what is being said and whether there is reasonable support for the claims being made. You can ask questions of yourself and of others as you research to test the acceptability of values claims:

- Would you like that done to you?
- Is the claim based on a value that is generally shared?

If the controversy involves information, ask questions about the information being used:

- Is there adequate information?
- Are the claims in the information accurate?

If the controversy surrounds concepts, look at the words being used:

- Are those taking various positions on the issue all using the same meanings of terms?

3. What is being assumed?

Faulty assumptions reduce legitimacy. You can ask:

- What are the assumptions behind an argument?
- Is the position based on prejudice or an attitude contrary to universally held human values, such as those set out in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights?
- Is the person presenting a position or opinion an insider or an outsider?

Insiders may have information and understanding not available to outsiders; however, they may also have special interests. Outsiders may lack the information or depth of understanding available to insiders; however, they may also be more objective.

4. What are the interests of those taking positions?

Try to determine the motivations of those taking positions on the issue. What are their reasons for taking their positions? The degree to which the parties involved are acting in self-interest could affect the legitimacy of their positions.

Walther chose pests and invasive species that cause the greatest damage to the natural resources of Western Canada and possible solutions that might be used to control these threats as his topic. Below, he describes how he identified and dealt with a controversial issue.

Walther's Explanation

I found that there is controversy surrounding how the damaged and dying pine tree stands that are infested with the mountain pine beetle are managed. This pest has devastated millions of hectares of pine forests in central British Columbia and western Alberta. The result is a significant amount of standing dead or dying wood, which the logging companies with harvest rights salvage through clear-cut logging. These companies try to get the wood to market before it is no longer useful as lumber, and before the dead dried trees are consumed by wildfires.

There are three controversies regarding salvage logging. These are described in a 2007 report by the Forest Stewardship Council:

1. Environmental interests prefer to see the infested trees left in the woods and allow the natural regeneration process to unfold over time. Economic interests prefer to harvest the infested trees to salvage what they can. Community interests generally want to remove the infested trees to lessen the risk of wildfire.
2. There are concerns that clear-cutting also eliminates green and healthy trees, particularly species other than pine.
3. There are concerns about the practice of "pre-emptive logging," which involves cutting down stands of healthy trees in the hope of removing a route the mountain pine beetles can follow into a new area.

I decided to do more research on the issues above and determine the interests of those taking one side or the other on each issue. I will include a discussion of these issues and offer my opinion on each in my report.

Your Turn

- A. Identify the most controversial issue, if any, you have uncovered during your research.
- B. Determine the different positions people have on this issue and the supporting arguments they present. If possible, include any supporting data for these different positions.
- C. If applicable, include a discussion of this issue in your presentation and report.