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Step 2: Select the Topic and Plan the Project

Now that you understand the project, you need to select a topic. How do you know when you have a good topic? If you can answer “yes” to all three questions below, you’re on your way!

- **Does the topic interest you?**
An interesting topic will keep you motivated through the research and writing process.
- **Is there enough information on the topic?**
You’ll need several good sources to create a written, an oral, or a multimedia report.
- **Is the topic within your abilities?**
Can you understand the research information and communicate it clearly to an audience?

As you work through the process of selecting a topic, keep these three questions in mind. Don’t waste time on a topic that you don’t really like or that doesn’t have enough resources.

What Do You Write About?

Your teacher may assign you a topic, but what if you have to choose your own? Start by asking yourself, “What do I like?” or “What interests me?” If you’re stumped at the moment, look through these sources:

- school magazines, books, and e-books
- your textbooks
- encyclopedias

Or think about movies, videos, or documentaries that you’ve seen. What sparked your imagination? What do you want to know more about? Choose a topic that interests you the most.

Be sure to have your teacher approve your topic idea. Then write or type your chosen topic—or your assigned topic—on the lines below.

My assigned topic:

OR

My chosen topic:

Ready for Research

What Do You Already Know About the Topic?

You may know more than you think. Suppose your assigned topic is “Mars: The Red Planet.” You may know that people once thought Mars had canals built by a race of Martians. You may know that Mars rovers have shown the planet doesn’t appear to support any life. It has no atmosphere or water on the surface. Even so, NASA wants to send a manned mission to Mars and build a colony there.

Make a list of things you already know about your topic.

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Ready for Research

What Do You Want to Know or Learn About the Topic?

Think about the chart you created for Step 1. What is the purpose of your project: to inform, to persuade, or to entertain? The purpose can guide the questions you ask.

For example, if you are writing about Mars:

To **inform** your audience, you might want to know:

- What happened to the planet's atmosphere and water?
- Did life ever exist on the planet?
- Are conditions too harsh to build a colony on Mars?

To **persuade** your audience, you might want to know:

- Why should we spend billions of dollars to go to Mars?
- Can learning to survive on Mars help us here on Earth?
- Can middle school students be involved in a Mars expedition?

To **entertain** your audience, you might want to know:

- What are the best stories, movies, or documentaries about Mars?
- How have science-fiction stories about Mars changed over time?
- What do I want to show people about the Red Planet?

Think about your purpose and make a list of things you want to know or learn about your topic. If you don't have a purpose yet, then just list the things you want to know about your topic.

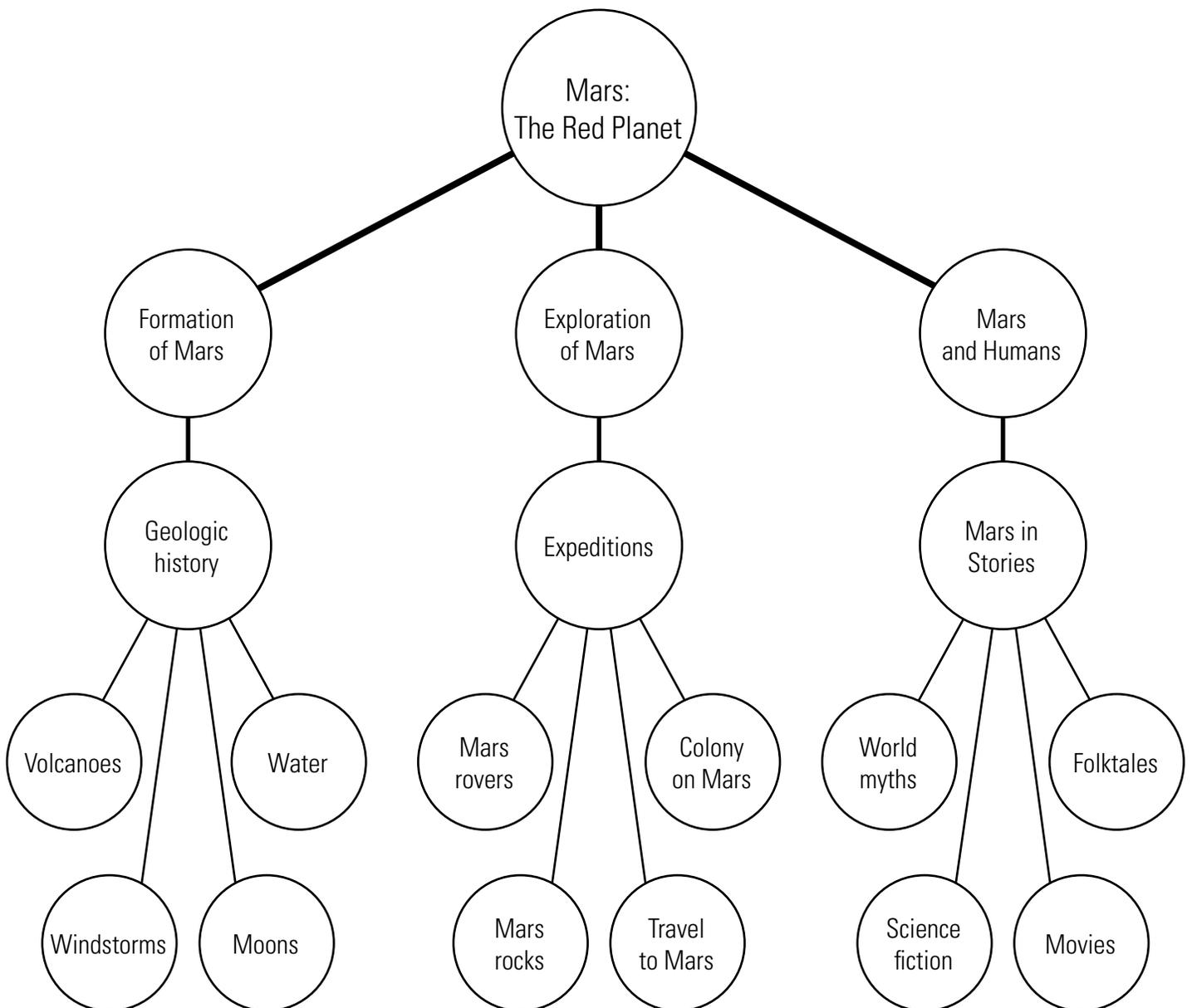
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How Do You Develop the Topic?

You're now ready to explore your topic. Look over your list of what you want to know. These questions will give you some ideas for your brainstorming session. You can use an idea web to show your main topic and related ideas, or subtopics. Then add more subtopics to those ideas.

If you are working with others, you can brainstorm in pairs or in a small group. If you are working on your own, set up a brainstorming session with a parent, teacher, or friend.

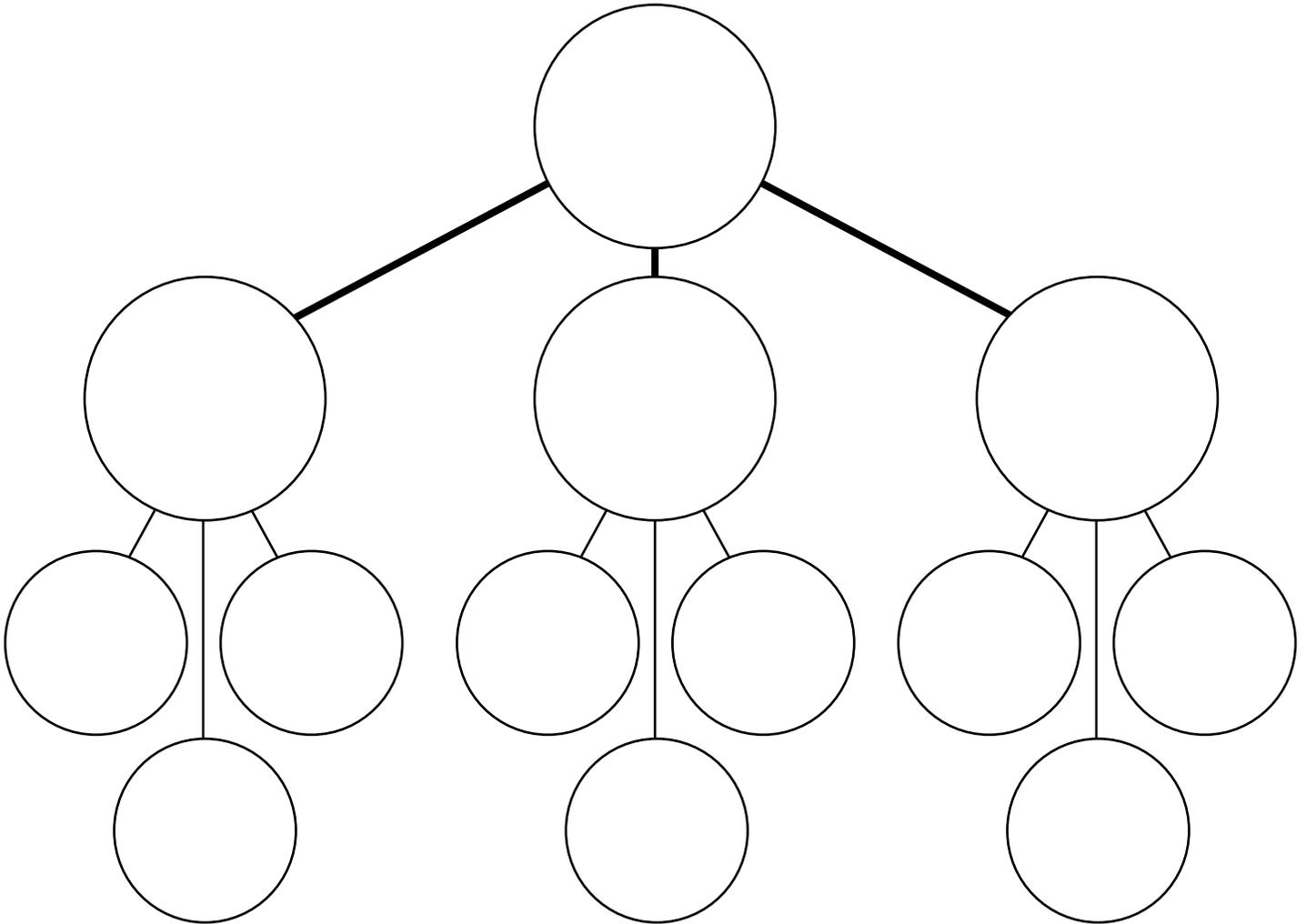
Set a time limit of about half an hour so you stay focused on the task. Here's a sample idea web for "Mars: The Red Planet."



Ready for Research

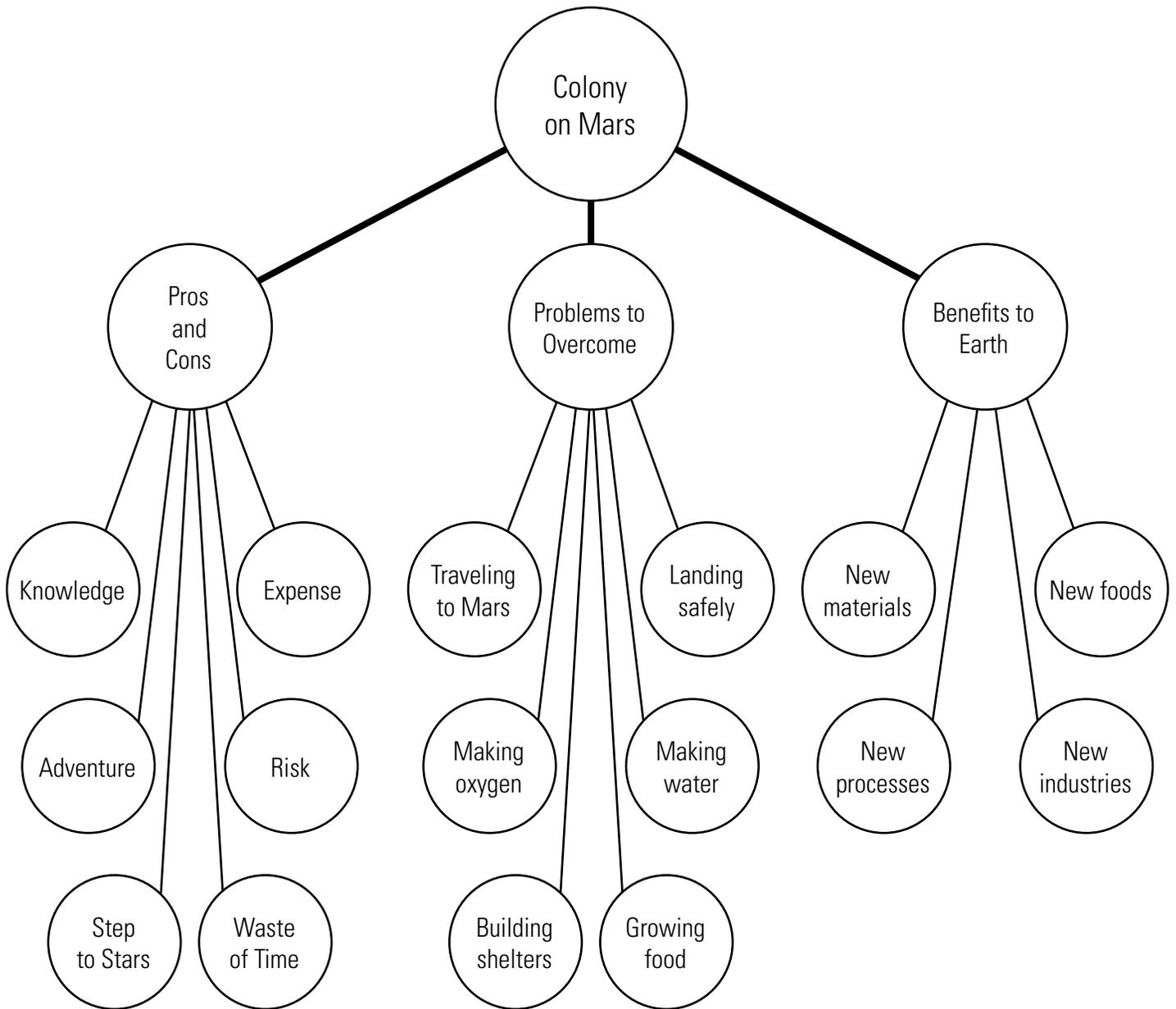
ACTIVITY

Use the idea web below to help you think about your topic. Try to brainstorm at least two or three subtopics for the main idea and then at least one subtopic for each of the first subtopics.



How Do You Develop the Topics and Subtopics Further?

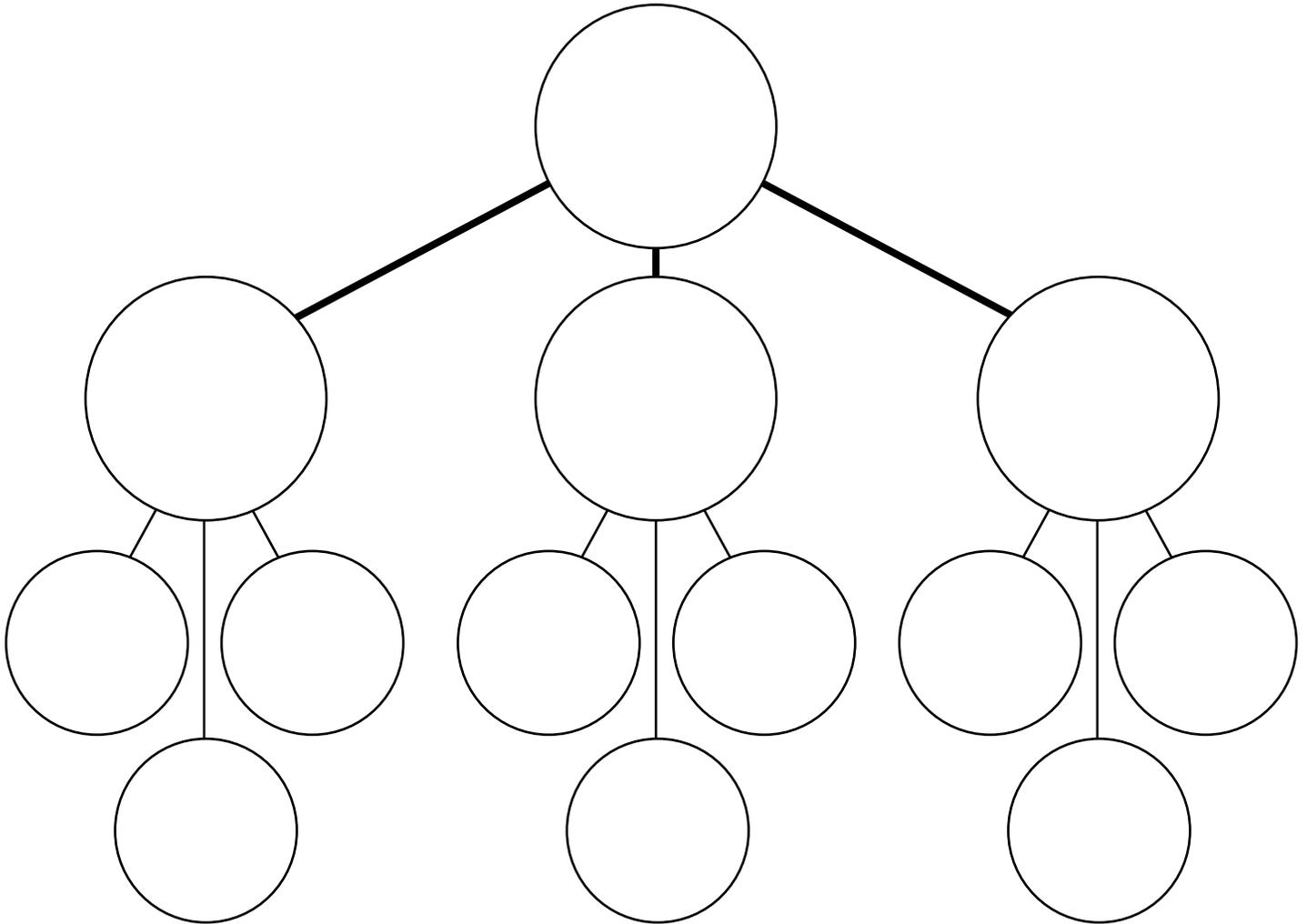
Suppose you choose to research the topic "Colony on Mars." You can use another idea web to develop this topic further.



Ready for Research

ACTIVITY

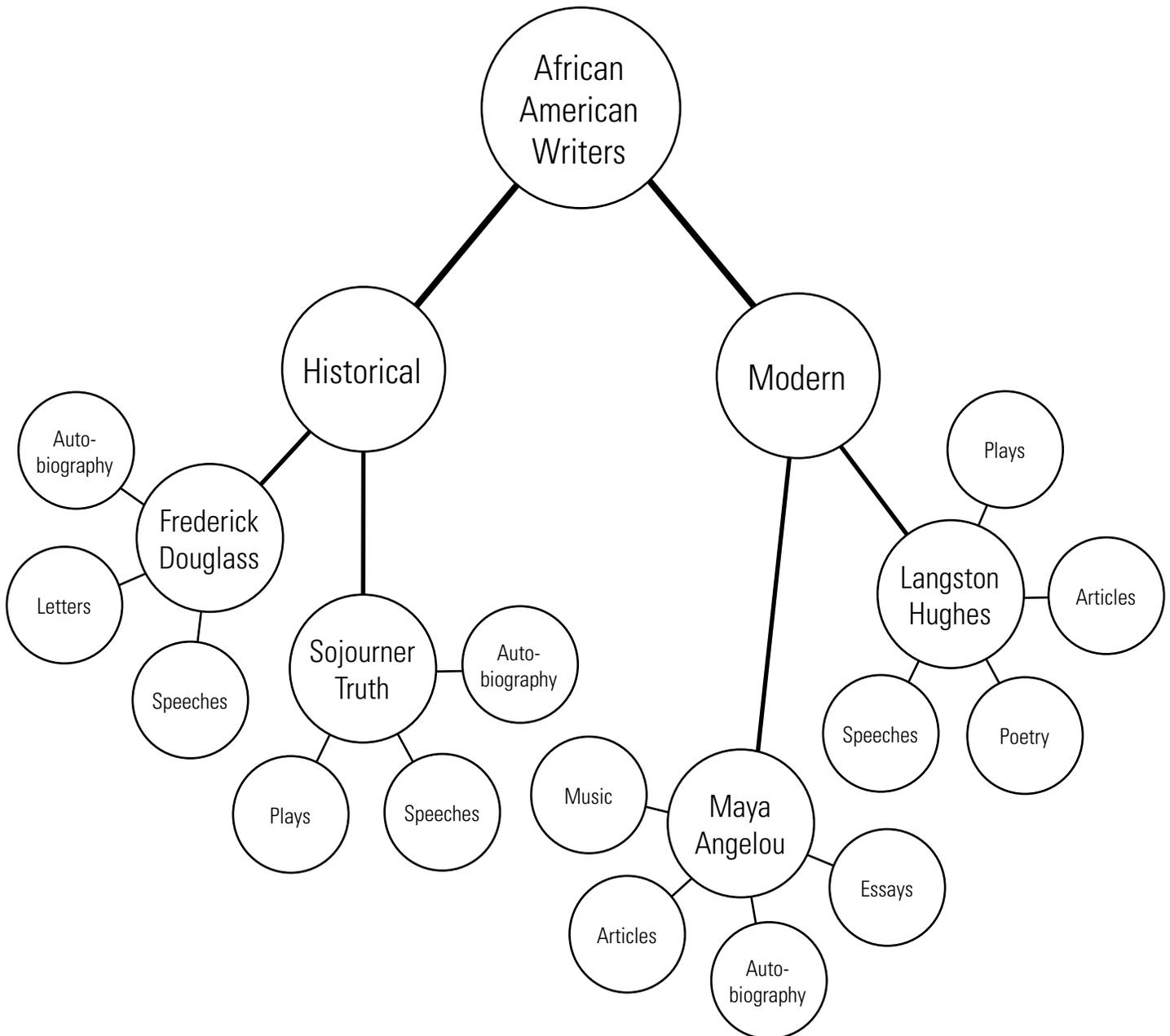
Look over your first idea web. Which subtopic appeals to you the most and fulfills the purpose of your project: to inform, to persuade, or to entertain? Use the idea web below to further develop your research topic.



Ready for Research

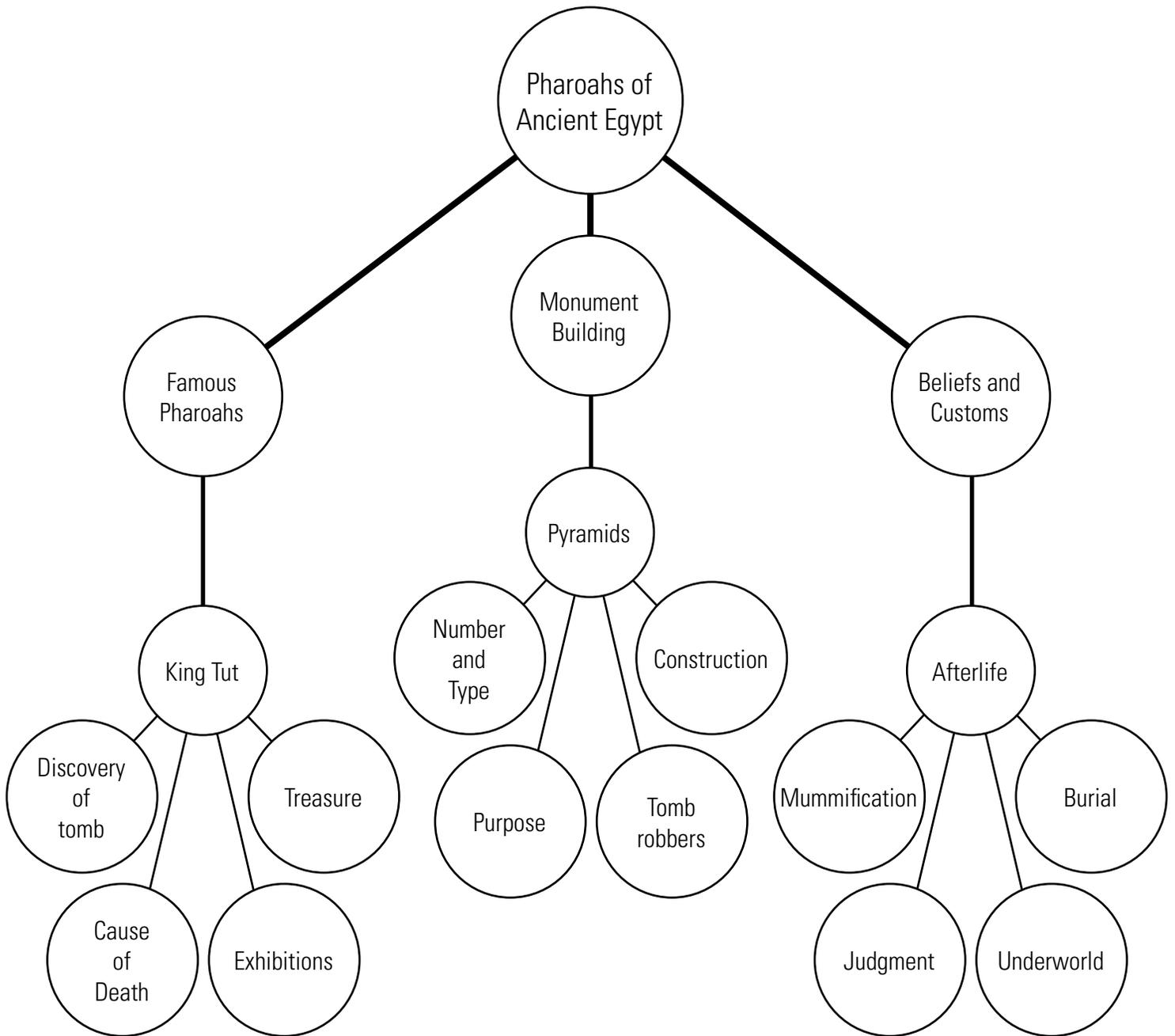
Use Idea Webs

Step 2 works the same for all subject areas. For example, if you want to write a research paper on African American writers, your idea web might look like this:



Ready for Research

Maybe you want to write about the pharaohs of ancient Egypt. Your idea web might look like this:



Ready for Research

Use Graphics

Now is a good time to think about the graphics and illustrations that can help your audience understand your topic better. For example, you might use a map to pinpoint where King Tut's tomb was found or use an illustration to show how scientists might grow food on Mars.

Choose the graphics that you might use with your topic:

maps

photos

bar, line, or pie charts

cartoons

timelines

clip art/free art

illustrations

my own artwork

graphics showing a process

Maybe you've already found some images you want to use. Photocopy or download them and be sure to record the magazine or book name and page number, or Web site, where you found each graphic. You want to be able to find the images again!

Make a list of graphics or graphic ideas for your topic. If you have graphics already, include the book or magazine name, page number, or Web site where you found them.

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Ready for Research

Review the Topic and Subtopics

At this point, take time to review your topic and subtopics. Is it a topic that really interests you? Is there enough information on it for you to complete the project? Can you understand the information and communicate it to others?

Make a quick check through encyclopedias, books, magazines, and online sites to be sure there's enough information on your topic. If you are working on your own, ask a teacher, parent, or friend to help you.

Complete the checklist below to see if you are ready to continue.

- My topic is interesting to me, and I want to know more about it. Yes No
- There are enough resources for me to complete the project. Yes No
- I can understand the information and explain it to others. Yes No

If you answered "no" to any of these questions, go back and pick another topic to develop. Keep going until you can say "yes" to all three questions!

Develop Good Research Questions

You have your topic, subtopics, and graphic ideas. You know the purpose for your project and what you will be creating: a written or an oral report or a multimedia presentation.

Now you can develop good questions to help guide your research. For instance, suppose you wanted to persuade people that we should develop colonies on Mars. Your research questions might be:

- What arguments do people have for and against colonizing Mars?
- What are scientists doing to solve the problems of growing food and generating water on arid Mars?
- What building materials can withstand the planet's harsh environment?
- How might all these discoveries be used to benefit people on Earth?

Ready for Research

Look over your topics and subtopics, and think about the purpose of your project. Go back to your “What do I want to know or learn” questions. Then write or type your research questions on the lines below. If you have trouble with this step, ask a teacher, parent, or friend to help you.

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Plan the Project: Set Up a Schedule

Your final step before launching into research is to plan the rest of your project. For example, if your work is due May 1 and it’s now March 1, you know you have two months to get everything done.

You’ve already completed Step 1! You have a topic and good research questions. Now estimate the time you need for research and gathering information, writing and revising, and presenting your project. Your project schedule might look like the one on the next page.

A schedule helps you divide your project into smaller steps. Set aside time each day to do something on your project—search online, check out books from the library, look through magazines, or interview someone. If you run into trouble finding resources or taking notes, you’ll have time to get help from your project partner or small group, or from a teacher, parent, or a friend.

As an added visual aid, buy or make a calendar and write in your “start” and “finish” dates on it. Then tack the calendar up where you can see it.

You’ll avoid that last-minute panic that hits when you put off working on an assignment.

Instead, with every day, you’re moving closer to your goal.

Now, you’re ready to research!

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Sample Project Schedule

Select topic

Start Date: March 1

Tasks

- Brainstorm ideas for topic
- Select topic, develop it, and get it approved
- Develop research questions

Completed: March 3

Research/Gather Information

Start Date: March 4

Tasks

- Visit library to research books and magazines on topic
- Search online for related articles
 - a. Create list of resources and take notes
 - b. Download or copy graphics; make sure the source is noted on the page
- Evaluate information; do any additional research needed

Finish by: April 15

Write and Revise

Start Date: April 16

Tasks

- Organize notes and create an outline
- Write first draft; place graphics with captions and credit lines
- Have teacher/parent/friends review first draft; revise or correct
- Proofread and fact-check final project

Finish by: April 30

Present project

Date: May 1

Turn in final report or presentation