Narrowing Your Topic to get an interesting research question

5 QUICK TIPS

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The Research Question

1. Identify Your Interests.
2. Select Key Concepts
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Write the Question
An interesting question provides the foundation for an interesting paper.

The Research Question should be:

- Interesting
Something that interests you and interests other scholars and researchers in the field. It should have implications for further discussion or research. It should be contributing to a discussion that is already happening in your field.

- Debatable

Lead to more detailed questions, have different points of view, and refute or build on previous research.

- Specific

Concentrate on a particular issue or emphasize, or address a real problem if possible.

- Require more than a Yes or No answer.

If your answer is yes or no, your paper will explore your reasoning through discussion and analysis, arriving at your final conclusion.

- Manageable

Broad enough to allow you to find information for the paper, but not too broad that there is too much information for you to sift through. It should also be able to provide
enough information for the length of the paper or project you are required to prepare.

“A research question is a narrow, challenging question addressing an issue, problem, or controversy that is answered with a conclusion based on the analysis and interpretation of evidence.” Lipowski, 2008.
Write about something you are interested in:

- **Current Issues.**
  
  Browse some magazines, journals, newspapers and blogs to see what issues are currently under discussion.

- **Find out what scholars and researchers are talking about.**
  
  Read some general scholarly articles in the subject. See what scholars and researchers are
talking about, identify sub-topics, ask questions, and look at their suggestions for further research. Revisit your class notes and readings to see what topics you discussed in class and related issues that came up in discussions.

- Brainstorm interesting topics- use the web tools listed in Tip 2.

Write down your initial reactions to some of the topics under discussion. Say why you agree or disagree, what you think and why you think this way. Make a shortlist of a few topics that interest you.

- Search Academic Search Premier

Search for an article on something that initially
interests you, read and see what aspects of the article are of most interest.

- **Search CQ Research**

  http://library.cqpress.com/cqresearcher/

  Select > "Browse Reports" then > "Issue Tracker"

  Look for reports on issues that you are interested in.

  *(Reports are written by journalists, and contain background material and interviews with specialists, researchers and professionals.)*
Write down some issues and topics that interest you.

Begin asking some questions, and write down 2 or 3 possible research questions. You will use some of the strategies in this booklet to refine your question.
Identify sub-topics and related subjects.

- Identify some key concepts from the initial questions you have written.
- Identify what academic discipline your subject is in eg. history, biology, sociology etc.
- Identify sub topics and related topics from the articles you have read.
- Identify sub topics from your lecture notes.
- Use brainstorming, mind mapping tools or graphic organizers to brainstorm some topics and key concepts.
• Bubble US
  https://bubbl.us

• Text to Mind Map
  http://www.text2mindmap.com

• Use Databases to help you narrow down your topic. Search for an article, then look in your database for ‘Limiting’ or ‘narrow your search’ options.

As many key concepts as you can.

• These concepts will be useful to you when you begin
to search the database for information. Your textbook, class reading and lecture notes can be very helpful at this stage.

- Find alternative ways to write the concepts, using synonyms and other terminology that may be unique to your discipline.
- Use some of these initial concepts to search a subject database. This will give you some more ideas.
- Examine the articles that you find- if they are relevant, your concepts are concise and usable, if you find that the articles are irrelevant, then you will need to rework the concepts that you have written.
Identify Keywords

Identify keywords and phrases used in the articles you have read.

Think of synonyms, and other similar words or phrases and remember to find synonyms for the broad and narrow concepts. Think of the words and terminology used in your particular discipline.

Use the following tools to identify some keywords:-

- **VisualThesaurus.com**
  www.visualthesaurus.com

- **Visuwords**
  http://www.visuwords.com

- **Snappy Words**
  http://www.snappywords.com/

- **Graph Words**
  http://graphwords.com
Google Keyword Tool

https://adwords.google.com/o/KeywordTool

These keywords will be important as you begin your search for more resources. Many databases use specific words and phrases, the more appropriate your keywords to the database, the more relevant your results will be.

Write the Question

Now you should have enough information to write the first draft of a research question for your paper. Your question may change while you are doing your initial background search for resources.

Write your question, focusing and contextualizing your question, using the keywords and concepts that you have identified.

Remember the Question should be:-
Interesting

Debatable

Specific

Require more than a Yes or No answer

Manageable

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**Rework and finalize your question.**

Broaden or narrow your focus by taking a different approach or contextualizing your question.

Once you have a question, you can begin your search for more resources and move on to writing your paper.
Use the Keywords and phrases to search relevant databases for more resources.

For help on how to find and search databases see "5 Quick Tips- Searching a Database to Find the Information You Need"."
Ask some questions- Who, What, When, Where, How?

Narrow down your topic by taking a particular approach:-

- Select a Particular Time - decade, century, specific year.
- Specify a Population - youth, Gen - X, social /cultural groups.
- Choose a Location - urban, rural, national, state.
- Investigate a Point of View - social, political, economic.

This is where you focus on your interests. What aspect of your subject is important or more interesting to you? Look
back at your initial reactions that you wrote down while brainstorming and see if you can isolate a particular question that you asked, or a concept that was particularly interesting.

Write some initial questions that you want to ask.

Use the suggestions above to narrow or broaden your focus. You may also use these limiters in combinations:

Example

You may study the impact on -

- Youth
- Pre-teens
- Pre-teens in urban areas
- Pre-teen in urban areas in 90's
Remember
The shorter the time period- the narrower the focus
The more specific the area or population the narrower the focus
You can narrow your question further by concentrating on a particular point of view. This is where you examine what relationships you are interested in and ask yourself some questions:-

• How do different perspectives impact and relate to
each other?

- Whose motives or well-being are you interested in?
- What do you think is the best solution?
- Who appears to receive the greatest benefit?

Write The Question

You can now rework your question focusing it on specific issues and perspectives remember

The research question should be:

- Interesting
- Debatable
- Specific
- Require more than a yes or no
• Manageable
Readings


Further Help

• Edison State College Library. General Research Skills-Unit 3. Defining a Research Topic.
• University of Michigan-Flint. Thompson Library

Libguides- Select a Topic to Research.

http://www.umflint.edu/library/research/selecttopic

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