

# Choosing a Topic and Question for Your Research Project

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*“... the educated person is not the person who can answer the questions, but the person who can question the answers.”*

*--Theodore Schick Jr.*

## Research Paper Introductory Topics

- Choosing a Topic and Question
- The Writing Process
- Identifying your Audience and Scope
- Conducting a Literature Review
- Developing a Thesis
- Primary Research Primer
  - Overview and Key Concepts
  - Basics Concepts of Social Research
  - Logical Foundations
  - Practical Considerations

## Choosing a Topic

Try to find a topic of interest to both you and others

- Intrinsic motivation
  - Hone in on your **passions**
  - What do **you** want to know?
  - What do find **inspiring**? (look to the creative arts)
- Extrinsic motivation
  - Talk to advisors & colleagues about **useful** work
  - Will clients, sponsors (or investors) **pay** for it?
- Put the two together
  - Techniques such as **concept mapping**

## Concept Map of Potential Research Topics



FIGURE 3.1 CONCEPT MAP OF POTENTIAL RESEARCH TOPICS

From: O'Leary, Z. (2004) *The Essential Guide to Doing Research*, London: Sage

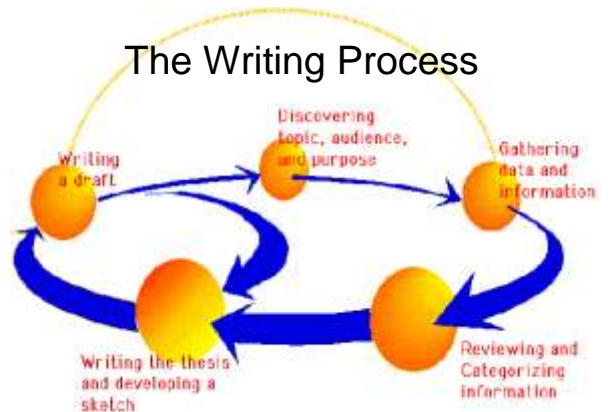
## From Interesting Topics to Researchable Questions

An 'angle' for your research can come from insights stemming from:

- Personal Experience
- Theory
- Observations
- Contemporary Issues
- Engagement with the Literature

## Narrow, Clarify and Redefine your Question

- Forming the right question is an iterative process; informed by each step of the research process.
- As you learn more, you need to constantly **narrow**, **clarify**, and even **redefine** your question.
- But you also need a good working question to push your research forward



Source: Cleveland State U. Writing Program

### Good Question Checklist

#### ✓ Is the question right for me?

- Do I have any specific expertise or “competitive advantage”?
- Will the question hold my interest?
- Are there synergies between the topic and my life experience and other obligations?
- Are there “multiple payoffs”?

### Good Question Checklist

#### ✓ Is an answer useful to others?

- Will the research make a contribution?
- Will the findings be considered significant?
- Do my advisors think I am on the right track?
- Do ‘experts’ in the field think my question is relevant/ important/ doable?
- Will anyone sponsor the research? Is there a potential career or financial payoff?

### Good Question Checklist

#### ✓ Is the question answerable?

- Are the terms well-defined?
- Are there any unchecked assumptions?
- Can information be collected in an attempt to answer the question?
- Are there any potential ethics problems?

### Good Question Checklist

#### ✓ Can I answer the question?

- Do I have the skills and expertise necessary to access this information? If not, can the skills be developed?
- Will I be able to obtain the data that I need?
- Will I be able to get it all done within my time constraints?
- Are costs likely to exceed my budget?

## Identifying your Audience\*

### Who might want to know what you've learned and why?

- Appropriate publication forums
- Appropriate writing strategy (style, support, tone, vocabulary, length)
  - For academic papers especially think about:
    - Participating in a "Conversation"
    - Identifying your specific niche or contribution
- Relation with the Professor

## Identifying your Audience (cont)

### What is the beginning and end-point?

- What does your audience know or believe?
- What one key point and 2-4 subpoints do you want your audience to take-away?

### How do you reach **your audience**?

- What journals do they read?
- Write to the editor:
  - Would you be interested in a paper on this?
  - **Who** else should I know about?
  - **What** else should I read or know about?

## Conducting a Literature Review

### Who are the experts?

- Read what they've written
  - What do they say? Whom do they cite?
- Write to them to discuss your proposal
  - Should I proceed? Who else should I talk to? What else should I read?

### Who are the publishers?

- What journals cover a topic?

## Conducting a Literature Review (cont)

### ■ Sources to be used with circumspection:

- Websites and Google-based searches
- Newspaper reports
- Non-academic presses
- Non-peer reviewed journals

### **Use the Deep-web of the Research Library**

- **Don't rely on a single source** (one institution or a single team of co-authors)

### **Get the big picture; Seek alternative views**



## Developing a Research Thesis

Needs to offer a perspective (think about the purpose and tone of your paper)

An appropriate scope

Do-able: Can you “prove” your point?