

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

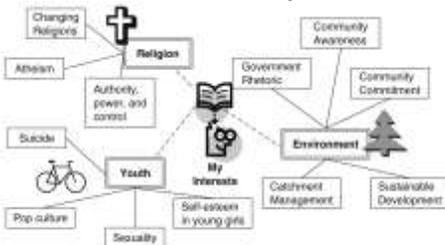


FIGURE 3.1 CONCEPT MAP OF POTENTIAL RESEARCH TOPICS

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

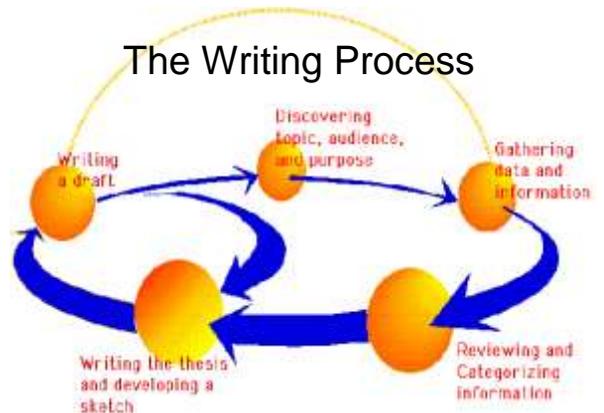
From Interesting Topics to Researchable Questions

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?