How to Choose a Research Topic and Compose Research Questions

Introduction

This handout goes over the first and perhaps most important stage of the research process: choosing a research topic and composing generative research questions. By considering what makes for a good research topic, you will learn to determine whether a topic is too narrow or too broad, how to compose research questions that will help you explore your research topic, and how to organize the research process and set manageable goals.

Choosing a Research Topic (That You Care About)

When beginning a research project, it is crucial to pick a topic you are genuinely interested in. That's the main thing. If you don't like a topic, it won't make for a good paper. Picking a topic you are passionate about will inspire and motivate you to write more, and it will even enhance your papers' credibility. Choosing a topic with which you have a personal connection will also make your papers unique, as the writing will be rooted in your own experience and reflections.

Some tips to consider when you approach choosing a research topic:

- **Take advantage of your local knowledge base** – the people you see and speak with both at the college and in your communities. **Have you observed and/or personally experienced any issues that are affecting people in your communities?**
- **Do some preliminary research:** what are other writers saying about a particular issue that you're drawn to? It can be helpful to both examine

what people are saying on social media and/or how this topic shows up in recently written news and opinion-editorial articles. This will help you learn about the exigence (urgency) of your topic.
- **Talk about research ideas with a friend, family member, and/or other people in your community.** They may be able to help focus your topic by discussing issues that didn't occur to you at first

Take notes while you are in this early stage of exploring different research topics. You should list as many topics that come to mind and then choose a few topics you are most drawn to and/or feel impacts you and/or people in your communitie(s).

Considering the Scope of Your Research Topic: Is it Too Broad? Too Narrow? Just Right?

Once you pick a research topic, you need to determine whether it is too broad or too narrow. While it's important to choose a topic that you are passionate about, it's also important to choose a topic that you can reasonably investigate and write about over the course of a few weeks. Consider the following examples as a guide:

- **Too broad**: I want to research mental health
- **Too narrow**: I want to research the impact of academic stress on advanced level math students in community colleges in Brooklyn.
- **Just right**: I want to research the impact of academic stress on college students' confidence in the US.

Composing Research Questions

It's often helpful to begin with a broad topic and then consider *what you want to know about that topic*. Beginning the research process with questions as opposed to an argument will help you follow the path of your interest. We are often taught that we need to know what we want to write before we begin, but research is different. Research should begin with a set of questions related to your topic that you are curious about. These questions will ultimately guide you to locate outside sources and data/information to build your own perspective and overall claim you want to make on your topic.

Once you come up with a list of questions, you will ultimately decide which question is your **main question** and then choose several **secondary questions** that you will need to research in order to explore your main question.

What makes for a "productive" or generative question?

- It is focused, original, and researchable
- Complex enough so that you have enough data to draw from
- Is neither too broad or too narrow

The "FIVE Ws" will also help you as you compose your research questions. Ask yourself:

- **WHY**: Why is this issue critical to explore? What will happen if the public does not pay attention to it? Why is this topic important to learn about right now?
- **WHO**: Who is most affected by this topic? What populations/organizations are relevant to understanding this issue/topic? Who is currently studying this topic and what are they concluding?
- **WHAT**: What is most important to understand about this topic? Are there multiple perspectives to take into consideration?
- **WHERE**: What spaces/environments/contexts is this topic most critical?
- **WHEN**: Is this topic affecting people right now? Is this topic evolving? How has it changed over time? What factors contribute to these changes?

<u>Examples</u>:

Sample topic: The impact of academic stress on college students' confidence in the US.

Main question: How does academic stress impact college students' confidence in the US?

Sample secondary questions:

- **Why**: Why is academic stress a widespread issue? What are the consequences of overlooking the impact of academic stress on students?
- **What**: What factors contribute to academic stress? Is there a strong correlation between students' stress levels and confidence? What resources and/or studies exist to learn more about how to manage academic stress?
- **Who**: What population(s) of students are most impacted by academic stress? What recent research exists on this topic and what do those studies conclude?

Composing a Research Proposal

Once you determine your topic, main questions, and compose your secondary research questions, you are ready to compose your research proposal. The following structure (borrowed from *The Craft of Research*) can help you compose your proposal.

1. **Topic**: I am researching _____(topic/issue/problem)
2. 2. Main Question: because I want to find out what/why /how _____.
3. 3. Significance: in order to help my reader understand _____.
4. 4. Three questions I will use to guide my research process:
   a. _____.
   b. _____.
   c. _____.

Set Realistic, Manageable Goals

Consider your time frame and assigned segment due dates (if applicable).

Task	Due Date	To Do	Completed
Submit proposed research topic for approval	January 10, 2025		
Based on feedback, narrow-down topic to maintain focus and limit its scope. Begin preliminary research; Weed-out as much unnecessary or repetitive information as possible. Present bibliography of resources/sources	January 24, 2025		
Create outline and submit to professor for feedback	January 31, 2025		
Submit first draft of research paper	February 14, 2025		
Use feedback to revise and refine your paper and submit final draft	February 28, 2025		

Additional Resources

Booth, Wayne C., et al. The Craft of Research. Fourth edition., The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

"Selecting a Research Topic: Overview." MIT Libraries, libguides.mit.edu/c.php?g=175961&p=1160010. Accessed 28 Feb. 2025.