THE
Craft
OF
Research

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From Topics to Questions

In this chapter we discuss how to find a topic among your interests, narrow it to a manageable scope, then question it to find the makings of a problem that can guide your research. If you are an experienced researcher or know the topic you want to pursue, skip to chapter 4. But if you are starting your first project, you will find this chapter useful.

If you are free to research any topic that interests you, that freedom might seem frustrating—so many choices, so little time. At some point, you have to settle on a topic. But you can't jump from picking a topic to collecting data: your readers want more than a mound of random facts. You have to find a reason better than a class assignment not only for you to devote weeks or months to your research, but for your readers to spend any time reading about it. You'll find that better reason when you can ask a *question* whose answer solves a *problem* that you can convince readers to care about. That question and problem are what will make readers think your report is worth their time. They also focus your research and save you from collecting irrelevant data.

In all research communities, some questions are "in the air," widely debated and researched, such as whether traits like shyness or an attraction to risk are learned or genetically inherited. But other questions may intrigue only the researcher: *Why do cats rub their faces against us? Why does a coffee spill dry up in the shape of a ring?* That's how a lot of research begins—not with a big question that attracts everyone in a field, but with a mental itch about a small one that only a single researcher wants to scratch. If you feel that itch, start scratching. But at some point, you must decide whether the answer to your question solves a problem significant

to a teacher, to other researchers, or even to a public whose lives
your research could change.

Now that word *problem* is itself a problem. Commonly, a problem means trouble, but among researchers it has a meaning so special that we devote the next chapter to it. But before you can frame your research problem, you have to find a topic that might lead to one. So we'll start there, with finding a topic.

QUESTION OR PROBLEM?

You may have noticed that we've been using the words *question* and *problem* almost interchangeably. But they are not quite the same. Some questions raise problems; others do not. A question raises a problem if not answering it keeps us from knowing something more important than its answer. For example, if we cannot answer the question *Are there ultimate particles?* we cannot know something even more important: the nature of physical existence. On the other hand, a question does not raise a problem if not answering it has no apparent consequences. For example, *Was Abraham Lincoln's right thumb longer than his nose?* We cannot think of what would we gain by knowing. At least at the moment.

3.1 FROM AN INTEREST TO A TOPIC

Most of us have more than enough interests, but beginners often find it hard to locate among theirs a topic focused enough to support a substantial research project. A research topic is an interest stated specifically enough for you to imagine becoming a local expert on it. That doesn't mean you already know a lot about it or that you'll have to know more about it than your teacher does. You just want to know a lot more about it than you do now.

If you can work on any topic, we offer only a cliché: start with what most interests you. Nothing contributes to the quality of your work more than your commitment to it.

3.1.1 Finding a Topic in a General Writing Course

Start by listing as many interests as you can that you'd like to explore. Don't limit yourself to what you think might interest a teacher or make him think you're a serious student. Let your ideas

flow. Prime the pump by asking friends, classmates, even your teacher about topics that interest them. If no good topics come to mind, consult the Quick Tip at the end of this chapter.

Once you have a list of topics, choose the one or two that interest you most. Then do this:

- In the library, look up your topic in a general bibliography such as the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and skim the subheadings. If you have a more narrow focus, look into specialized guides such as the *American Humanities Index.* Most libraries have copies on the shelf; many subscribe to their online equivalents, but not all of them let you skim subject headings. (We discuss these resources in chapter 5 and list several in the appendix.)

- On the Internet, Google your topic, but don't surf indiscriminately. Look first for Web sites that are roughly like sources you would find in a library, such as online encyclopedias. Read the entry on your general topic, and then copy the list of references at the end for a closer look. Use Wikipedia to find ideas and sources, but always confirm what you find in a reliable source. Few experienced researchers trust Wikipedia, so *under no circumstances cite it as a source of evidence* (unless your topic is the Wikipedia itself).

- You can also find ideas in blogs, which discuss almost every contentious issue, usually ones too big for a research paper. But look for posts that take a position on narrow aspects of the larger issues: if you disagree with a view, investigate it.

3.1.2 Finding a Topic for a First Research Project in a Particular Field

Start by listing topics relevant to your particular class *and* that interest you, then narrow them to one or two promising ones. If the topic is general, such as *religious masks,* you'll have to do some random reading to narrow it. But read with a plan:

- Skim encyclopedia entries in your library or online. Start with standard ones such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica.* Then con-

sult specialized ones such as the *Encyclopedia of Religion* or the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

- Skim headings in specialized indexes, such as the *Philosopher's Index*, *Psychological Abstracts*, or *Women's Studies Abstracts*. Use subheadings for ideas of how others have narrowed your topic.

- Google your topic, but not indiscriminately. Use Google Scholar, a search engine that focuses on scholarly journals and books. Skim the articles it turns up, especially their lists of sources.

When you know the general outline of your topic and how others have narrowed it, try to narrow yours. If you can't, browse through journals and Web sites until it becomes more clearly defined. That takes time, so start early.

3.1.3 Finding a Topic for an Advanced Project

Most advanced students already have interests in topics relevant to their field. If you don't, focus on what interests you, but remember that you must eventually show why it should also interest others.

- Find what interests other researchers. Look online for recurring issues and debates in the archives of professional discussion lists relevant to your interests. Search online and in journals like the *Chronicle of Higher Education* for conference announcements, conference programs, calls for papers, anything that reflects what others find interesting.

- Skim the latest issues of journals on your library's new arrivals shelf, not just for articles, but also for conference announcements, calls for papers, and reviews. Skim the most recent articles in your library's online database.

- Investigate the resources that your library is particularly rich in. If, for example, it (or one nearby) holds a collection of rare papers on an interesting topic, you have not only found a topic but a way into it. Before you settle on a topic, on the other

hand, be sure your library has at least some relevant sources. If not, you may have to start over.
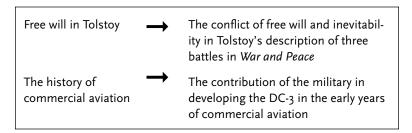
3.2 FROM A BROAD TOPIC TO A FOCUSED ONE

At this point, your biggest risk is settling on a topic so broad that it could be a subheading in a library catalog: *spaceflight*; *Shakespeare's problem plays*; *natural law*. A topic is probably too broad if you can state it in four or five words:

Free will in Tolstoy

The history of commercial aviation

A topic so broad can intimidate you with the task of finding, much less reading, even a fraction of the sources available. So narrow it:

Free will in Tolstoy	➡	The conflict of free will and inevitability in Tolstoy's description of three battles in *War and Peace*
The history of commercial aviation	➡	The contribution of the military in developing the DC-3 in the early years of commercial aviation

We narrowed those topics by adding words and phrases, but of a special kind: *conflict, description, contribution,* and *developing.* Those nouns are derived from verbs expressing actions or relationships: *to conflict, to describe, to contribute,* and *to develop.* Lacking such "action" words, your topic is a static thing.

Note what happens when we restate static topics as full sentences. Topics (1) and (2) change almost not at all:

(1) Free will in Tolstoy$_{topic}$ → There is free will in Tolstoy's novels.$_{claim}$

(2) The history of commercial aviation$_{topic}$ → Commercial aviation has a history.$_{claim}$

But when (3) and (4) are revised into full sentences, they are closer to claims that a reader might find interesting.

(3) The *conflict* of free will and inevitability in Tolstoy's *description* of three battles in *War and Peace*$_{topic}$ → In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy *describes* three battles in which free will and inevitability *conflict.*$_{claim}$

(4) The *contribution* of the military in *developing* the DC-3 in the early years of commercial aviation$_{topic}$ → In the early years of commercial aviation, the military *contributed* to the way the DC-3 *developed.*$_{claim}$

Such claims may at first seem thin, but you'll make them richer as you work through your project.

Caution: Don't narrow your topic so much that you can't find data on it. Too many data are available on *the history of commercial aviation* but too few (at least for beginning researchers) on *the decision to lengthen the wingtips on the DC-3 prototype for military use as a cargo carrier.*

3.3 FROM A FOCUSED TOPIC TO QUESTIONS

Once they have a focused topic, many new researchers make a beginner's mistake: they immediately start plowing through all the sources they can find on a topic, taking notes on everything they read. With a promising topic such as *the political origins of legends about the Battle of the Alamo*, they mound up endless facts connected with the battle: what led up to it, histories of the Texas Revolution, the floor plan of the mission, even biographies of generals Santa Anna and Sam Houston. They accumulate notes, summaries, descriptions of differences and similarities, ways in which the stories conflict with one another and with what historians think really happened, and so on. Then they dump it all into a report that concludes, *Thus we see many differences and similarities between . . .*

Many high school teachers would reward such a report with a good grade, because it shows that the writer can focus on a topic, find data on it, and assemble those data into a report, no small achievement—for a first project. But in *any* college course, such a report falls short if it is seen as just a pastiche of vaguely related

facts. If a writer asks no specific *question* worth asking, he can offer no specific *answer* worth supporting. And without an answer to support, he cannot select from all the data he *could* find on a topic just those relevant to his answer. To be sure, those fascinated by Elvis Presley movie posters or early Danish anthropological films will read *anything* new about them, no matter how trivial. Serious researchers, however, do not report data for their own sake, but to support the answer to a question that they (and they hope their readers) think is worth asking.

So the best way to begin working on your specific topic is not to find all the data you can on your general topic, but to formulate questions that point you to just those data that you need to answer them.

You can start with the standard journalistic questions: *who, what, when,* and *where,* but focus on *how* and *why.* To engage your best critical thinking, systematically ask questions about your topic's history, composition, and categories. Then ask any other question you can think of or find in your sources. Record all the questions, but don't stop to answer them even when one or two grab your attention. (And don't worry about keeping these categories straight; their only purpose is to stimulate questions and organize your answers.) Let's take up the example of masks mentioned earlier.

3.3.1 Ask about the History of Your Topic

- How does it fit into a **larger developmental context**? Why did your topic come into being? *What came before masks? How were masks invented? Why? What might come after masks?*

- What is its own **internal history**? How and why has the topic itself changed through time? *How have Native American masks changed? Why? How have Halloween masks changed? How has the role of masks in society changed? How has the booming market for kachina masks influenced traditional design? Why have masks helped make Halloween the biggest American holiday after Christmas?*

3.3.2 Ask about Its Structure and Composition

- How does your topic fit into the **context of a larger structure or function as part of a larger system**? *How do masks reflect the values of different societies and cultures? What roles do masks play in Hopi dances? In scary movies? In masquerade parties? How are masks used other than for disguise?*

- How do its parts **fit together as a system**? *What parts of a mask are most significant in Hopi ceremonies? Why? Why do some masks cover only the eyes? Why do few masks cover just the bottom half of the face? How do their colors play a role in their function?*

3.3.3 Ask How Your Topic Is Categorized

- How can your topic be **grouped into kinds**? *What are the different kinds of masks? Of Halloween masks? Of African masks? How are they categorized by appearance? By use? By geography or society? What are the different qualities of masks?*

- How does your topic **compare to and contrast with** others like it? *How do Native American ceremonial masks differ from those in Japan? How do Halloween masks compare with Mardi Gras masks?*

3.3.4 Turn Positive Questions into Negative Ones

- *Why have masks* not *become a part of other holidays, like President's Day or Memorial Day? How do Native American masks* not *differ from those in Africa? What parts of masks are typically* not *significant in religious ceremonies?*

3.3.5 Ask *What If?* and Other Speculative Questions

- How would things be different if your topic never existed, disappeared, or were put into a new context? *What if no one ever wore masks except for safety? What if everyone wore masks in public? What if it were customary to wear masks on blind dates? In marriage ceremonies? At funerals? Why are masks common*

in African religions but not in Western ones? Why don't hunters
in camouflage wear masks? How are masks and cosmetic surgery
alike?

3.3.6 Ask Questions Suggested by Your Sources

You won't be able to do this until you've done some reading on
your topic. Ask questions that **build on agreement**:

- If a source makes a claim you think is persuasive, ask ques-
  tions that might extend its reach. *Elias shows that masked balls
  became popular in eighteenth-century London in response to anxi-
  eties about social mobility. Did the same anxieties cause similar
  developments in Venice?*

- Ask questions that might support the same claim with new
  evidence. *Elias supports his claim about masked balls with pub-
  lished sources. Is it also supported by letters and diaries?*

- Ask questions analogous to those that sources have asked
  about similar topics. *Smith analyzes costumes from an economic
  point of view. What would an economic analysis of masks turn up?*

Now ask questions that reflect **disagreement**:

- *Martinez claims that carnival masks uniquely allow wearers to es-
  cape social norms. But could there be a larger pattern of all masks
  creating a sense of alternative forms of social or spiritual life?*

(We discuss in more detail how to use disagreements with sources
in 6.4.)

If you are an experienced researcher, look for questions that
other researchers ask but don't answer. Many journal articles end
with a paragraph or two about open questions, ideas for more re-
search, and so on (see p. 63 for an example). You might not be
able to do all the research they suggest, but you might carve out
a piece of it. You can also look for Internet discussions on your
topic, then "lurk," just reading the exchanges to understand the
kinds of questions those on the list debate. Record questions that
spark your interest. You can post questions on the list if they are

specific and narrowly focused. But first see whether the list welcomes questions from students. (If you can't find a list using a search engine, ask a teacher or visit the Web site of professional organizations in your field.)

3.3.7 Evaluate Your Questions

When you run out of questions, evaluate them, because not all questions are equally good. Look for questions whose answers might make you (and, ideally, your readers) think about your topic in a new way. Avoid questions like these:

- Their answers are settled fact that you could just look up. *Do the Inuit use masks in their wedding ceremonies?* Questions that ask *how* and *why* invite deeper thinking than *who, what, when,* or *where,* and deeper thinking leads to more interesting answers.

- Their answers would be merely speculative. *Would church services be as well attended if the congregation all wore masks?* If you can't imagine finding hard data that might settle the question, it's a question you can't settle.

- Their answers are dead ends. *How many black cats slept in the Alamo the night before the battle?* It is hard to see how an answer would help us think about any larger issue worth understanding better, so it's a question that's probably not worth asking.

You might, however, be wrong about that. Some questions that seemed trivial, even silly, have answers more significant than expected. One researcher wondered why a coffee spill dries up in the form of a ring and discovered things about the properties of fluids that others in his field thought important—and that paint manufacturers found valuable. So who knows where a question about cats in the Alamo might take you? You can't know until you get there.

Once you have a few promising questions, try to combine them into larger ones. For example, many questions about the Alamo

story ask about the interests of the storytellers and their effects on their stories: *How have politicians used the story? How have the storytellers' motives changed? Whose purposes does each story serve?* These can be combined into a single more significant question:

> How and why have users of the Alamo story given the event a mythic quality?

With only a topic to guide your research, you can find endless data and will never know when you have enough (much less what to do with it). To go beyond fact-grubbing, find a question that will narrow your search to just those data you need to answer it.

3.4 FROM A QUESTION TO ITS SIGNIFICANCE

Even if you are an experienced researcher, you might not be able to take the next step until you are well into your project, and if you are a beginner, you may find it deeply frustrating. Even so, once you have a question that holds your interest, you must pose a tougher one *about* it: *So what? Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking*? You might not be able to answer that *So what?* question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.

Think of it like this: What will be lost if you *don't* answer your question? How will *not* answering it keep us from understanding something else better than we do? Start by asking *So what?* at first of yourself:

> So what if I don't know or understand how butterflies know where to go in the winter, or how fifteenth-century musicians tuned their instruments, or why the Alamo story has become a myth? So what if I can't answer my question? What do we lose?

Your answer might be *Nothing. I just want to know.* Good enough to start, but not to finish, because eventually your readers will ask as well, and they will want an answer beyond *Just curious.* Answering *So what?* vexes all researchers, beginners and experienced alike, because when you have only a question, it's hard to predict

whether others will think its answer is significant. But you must work toward that answer throughout your project. You can do that in three steps.

3.4.1 Step 1: Name Your Topic

If you are beginning a project with only a topic and maybe the glimmerings of a good question or two, start by naming your project:

> I am trying to learn about (working on, studying) _____.

Fill in the blank with your topic, using some of those nouns derived from verbs:

> I am studying the *causes* of the *disappearance* of large North American mammals . . .

> I am working on Lincoln's *beliefs* about *predestination* and their *influence* on his *reasoning* . . .

3.4.2 Step 2: Add an Indirect Question

Add an indirect question that indicates what you do not know or understand about your topic:

1. I am studying/working on _____
   2. **because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/ why/how** _____.

1. I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals
   2. **because I want to find out whether they were hunted to extinction . . .**

1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestation and its influence on his reasoning
   2. **because I want to find out how his belief in destiny influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War . . .**

When you add that *because I want to find out how/why/whether* clause, you state why *you* are pursuing your topic: to answer a question important to you.

If you are a new researcher and get this far, congratulate your-self, because you have moved beyond the aimless collection of data. But now, if you can, take one step more. It's one that advanced re-searchers know they must take, because they know their work will be judged not by its significance to them but by its significance to others in their field. They must have an answer to *So what?*

3.4.3 Step 3: Answer *So What?* by Motivating Your Question

This step tells you whether your question might interest not just you but others. To do that, add a second indirect question that ex-plains why you asked your first question. Introduce this second implied question with *in order to help my reader understand how, why, or whether*:

1. I am studying the causes of the disappearance of large North American mammals
    2. because I want to find out whether the earliest peoples hunted them to extinction
        3. **in order to help my reader understand whether native peoples lived in harmony with nature or helped destroy it.**

1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and their influence on his reasoning
    2. because I want to find out how his belief in destiny and God's will influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War,
        3. **in order to help my reader understand how his religious be-liefs may have influenced his military decisions.**

It is the indirect question in step 3 that you hope will seize your readers' interest. If it touches on issues important to your field, even indirectly, then your readers should care about its answer.

Some advanced researchers begin with questions that others in their field already care about: *Why did the giant sloth and woolly mammoth disappear from North America?* Or: *Is risk taking geneti-cally based?* But many researchers, including at times the three of us, find that they can't flesh out the last step in that three-part sen-tence until they finish a first draft. So you make no mistake *begin-*

ning your research without a good answer to that third question—*Why does this matter?*—but you face a problem when you *finish* it without having thought through those three steps at all. And if you are doing advanced research, you *must* take that step, because answering that last question is your ticket into the conversation of your community of researchers.

Regularly test your progress by asking a roommate, relative, or friend to force you to flesh out those three steps. Even if you can't take them all confidently, you'll know where you are and where you still have to go. To summarize: Your aim is to explain

1. what you are writing about—*I am working on the topic of . . .*
     2. what you don't know about it—*because I want to find out . . .*
          3. why you want your reader to know and care about it—*in order to help my reader understand better . . .*

In the following chapters, we return to those three steps and their implied questions, because they are crucial not just for finding questions, but for framing the research problem that you want your readers to value.