Book Reading Summary: Where Research Begins: choosing a research topic that matters to you (and the world)

Tianpei Xie

Dec. 10th., 2023

Contents

1 Summary

1.1 Research Phases: Inside-Out Self-Centered Approach

Where Research Begins: choosing a research topic that matters to you (and the world), Thomas S. Mullaney and Christopher Rea, The University of Chicago Press.

- In this book, the authors proposed the ***Self-Centered Research*** process, an inside-out self-motivated research ***practice***, ***ethic*** and ***a state of mind***. It discuss, at *the beginning phase of research*, how the research problem is *identified*, *refined* and *evaluated*, through ***inward-focus*** *first* and ***outward-focus*** later methodology.
- This book focus on ***uncovering the internal curiosity*** of researcher before the research process started, and in the process to gain *self-awareness*, *self-trust* and *affirmation on the direction of research* on their own. It stress the importance of "***finding your center***" – the matters that really motivates *you* to start the research.
- By using "***introversion first, extroversion second***" approach, the authors help the early researchers to ***avoid*** being ***distracted*** by perspectives, ideas, suggestions from ***others*** *(authorities, mentors, colleagues)* in research communities, as well as to *avoid* ***the judgemental thoughts*** from ***their own mind***, which could hurt the inner exploration processing at early stage of research.
- This book has a favor of using ***psychological*** *treatement* to examine the researcher's inner self.
- The key messages to early researchers:
  1. Be ***vulnerable***
  2. ***Listening to yourself***
  3. ***Writing things down***
- This book is divided into two stages:
  - ***inward stage***: the ***goal*** of this stage is the ***raise*** *the* ***self-awareness*** of the researcher ourselves on our motivations and values. This way to make sure we are confident on our direction and priorites. This stage is also the stage we accumulate knowledge, source materials and raise our arguments.

    In this stage, we transform
    - from topics into questions,
    - from questions into problems,
    - from problems into sources, then
    - we engage sources and assemble our arguments.
    - finally, we plan our project and write our research proposal.
  - ***outward stage***: the goal of this stage is to *raise awareness* on the ideas and perspectives in your ***field*** and your ***Problem Collectives***, and to make most out of this ***relationship***.

Part 2 moves your research journey into a *broader* and deeper ***engagement*** with other people's ideas. This stage focus on ***engaging*** with external world and their perspectives, ideas, esp. with your *field* and your Problem Collectives.

We are also going to revise our draft based on their feedbacks multiple rounds.

1.2 Summary of Chapters

- This books covers several phases of early research:
  1. ***Question Brainstorming with Self-Observation***: at this earliest phase, the task is to generate questions relevant to you, ***from the best of your knowledge***.
     - This part covers the traditional method of "***from topics to questions***". But in this book, the emphasis is on self-observing on your own reactions to specific matters in the topic and your own perspective and related questions.
     - While scanning through entities under a topic, ask yourself "*Why does that interest you?*" or "*Why i do not care about it?*" ***Take notes*** on questions generated and *flag* those with unconsciously effect (interest/bordom) on you.
     - The point is being ***honest***, ***self-observing*** but not ***not be judgemental***.
     - Your questions are for yourself. They are meant to be ***unpolished***. Use normal worlds, not jargons. You are not meant to impress anyone.
     - *Your questions* need to be ***specific and concrete***, *not vague*, not *abstracting*.
  2. ***Question Refinement***:
     - Rewrite your questions, making it clear, precise, jargon-free.
     - Avoid biases, prejudice; avoid too much assumptions
     - ***Refine keywords*** *and* ***Search*** *for* ***other primary sources*** that mentioned in *your primary sources*. These related primary sources can help you ask better questions. They also contains ***new keywords***, which helps to find more and better primary sources.

       Keep track of all keywords and searches.
     - Make the ***Assumption*** visable. ***Categorize and Sort*** them according to a) the assumption that you want to work with; b) the assumption that you want to discard; c) the assumption you are uncertain about for now. During this categorization process, write down your thoughts. Modify weak, unfounded, prejudical assumptions.
  3. ***Problem Identification***: This is the part where we move "***from questions to problems***".
     - In this part, we found ***internal connections*** between questions.
     - ***Generalize*** from previous questions to higher level.
     - Identify ***the shared concerns*** among these questions.
  4. ***Primary Source Engagement***: After identifying your problems, we need to revisit

the primary sources we have and to identify, filter and refine your list of primary sources. You need to consider how to answer your questions with the primary sources you have.

- You need to distinguish primary and secondary sources.
- You need to deep dive and discover the full potential of these primary sources. This helps you to look beyond obvious questions and to arrive at something original.
- Envision imaginative primary sources that best answer your question. Search for it.
- You need to pinpoint these sources to your problem; determine if they are relevant, reduandent, reliable.

5. ***Argument Construction***: You need to make proper argument from these sources.
   - Find the dots.
   - Figure out which dots belong to your picture. See what is there? See what is missing?
   - Figure out which dots are not dots at all. Not all materials can be used as sources.
   - Determine when you have enough.
   - Connect the dots.
6. ***Research Project Design***: Plan the project by answering following questions
   - What outcome do you want to achieve?
   - What primary sources do you possess?
   - What resources (time, computational, people, other responsibilities) can you utilize? What constraints?
   - What is the deadline?
   - What timeline are you planning?
   - Understand my personality

   Finally, write it down as a research proposal for yourself.
7. ***Problem Collective Identification***:
8. ***Rewriting for Problem Collective***:
9. ***Field Grouping via Problem Collectives***:
10. ***Rewriting for Field***:
11. ***Assembling into Draft***:

2 Try This Now

2.1 Brainstorming Questions

- **Exercise 2.1 (Search Yourself)** *The **goal**: To use a list of **primary-source search results** to figure out **the aspects of your topic** that **most interest you**, and **draft questions** based on these interests.*

  You already know how to search the internet. This exercise prompts you to use the results of an internet search to search yourself.

  *This exercise offers one way to **get from a topic to questions***

  1. *Based on the "Try This Now" exercise you completed in the introduction, **write down any and all of the research topics you are drawn to**. Feel free to be as general as possible, and to include more than one.*
  2. ***Select** one of the topics on your list and run a search using at least three (or more) of the webbased databases listed below.*
  3. *Click on a few of the **search** results that **interest** you – say, five to ten.*
  4. *Don't read the search results in depth. Instead, your goal is to dedicate*
     - *perhaps 20 percent of your mental energy to **scanning** the list of search results (and perhaps the contents of a few) and*
     - *the remaining 80 percent of your mental energy to **self-observation**.*

     *You want to **read yourself** as you **read the results**.*
  5. *In particular, pay close attention to how your **mind** and **body** are **responding** to different search results:*
     - *Which ones seem to **jump out at you**?*
     - *Which ones cause you to **linger** just a split second longer?*
     - *Which ones quicken your **pulse**, even slightly?*
  6. ***Write** down at least ten entries that **attract** you, without worrying about why they do.*
  7. *Based on this list of ten entries, **answer** the three questions above about those entries, to **generate self-evidence**.*
  8. *Sleep on it (take a break of at least twenty-four hours).*
  9. *Return to the answers you wrote out and ask yourself: If I didn't know the person who wrote these answers, or* flagged *these search results as* "interesting,"

     what kinds of guesses would I make about this researcher?

     What story does this "self-evidence" seem to tell about the researcher, in terms of their concerns and interests?
  10. ***Write** down your **thoughts** on these questions, getting as much down on paper as possible.*

Common **Mistakes**:

- Not writing things down
- Getting bogged down in **individual sources too soon**
- Excluding "fluke" search results that **seem unrelated** to the keywords you entered in the database or unrelated to your topic
- Feigning interest in a search result that seems "**important**," even if it doesn't really interest you
- Only registering interest in search results for which **you think you know why** you're interested in them, instead of being more **inclusive**
- Trying to make a list of noticings that is **coherent** and fits together
- When speculating about why a search result jumped out at you, worrying about whether or not the reason is "**important**," based on some **imagined external standard**

- **Exercise 2.2 (Let Boredom Be Your Guide)** *The **goal**: To become **attentive** to your **active dislikes**, identifying questions that you "should" (in theory) be interested in based on your topic of interest, but aren't. By **understanding what you don't care about** regarding your topic, you accelerate the process of figuring out what you do care about.*

  *After all, the most common reaction human beings have to **boredom** is **avoidance**. We try to dismiss or ignore things that bore us.*

  But how would you explain why something bores you – especially something that seems like it should align with your topic of interest? Here's what to do:

  1. *Go back to your search results, and scan them again.*
  2. *Pay close attention to your EKG readout, focusing this time on the results that **bore** you.*

     In the very same way that we spoke of not "outsmarting" yourself regarding your interests, you will need to be cautious during this process as well.
  3. *Choose a few "**boring**" results and **write** down answers to the same questions you answered before – this time for these different, boring search results:*
     - *What does this make me think of?*
     - *If I had to venture a guess, why did this one **not jump out at me**?*
     - *What **questions** come to mind for me when I look at this search result?*
  4. *Now, for each search result, write some version of this sentence: "I'm **more interested in** [something else] **than** [search result]."*

  Common **Mistakes**:

  - Denying boredom, or feigning interest in something because you feel it's "on topic" and demands your interest because it's "important."
  - Engaging in circular logic.

- **Exercise 2.3 (Go Small or Go Home)** *The **goal**: To generate **specific, fact-focused questions** about your topic before you've done in-depth research. These will lead to bigger questions later on.*

  You have a set of notes about two things:

  - *What you noticed about sources on a topic, and your best guesses as to why you noticed those things*
  - *What, among the "logical" or "obvious" aspects of your proposed topic, bored you and why*

  Using all of this as inspiration, try the following – as always, in writing.

  1. *In a stream of consciousness, **write** out a minimum of **twenty questions** related to your topic.*

     *The **key** is to make your questions as **specific** as possible, using the following prompts:*

     - *What facts do you **wish to know** about your topic?*
     - *Which **data** or **information** about your topic might you need to satisfy your curiosity?*
     - *What telling **details** about your topic do you **imagine** might exist?*

  *Asking **precise factual questions** is one **key** to **escaping Topic Land**.*

2.2 From Questions to Problems

- **Exercise 2.4 (Run a Diagnostic Test on Your Questions)**
- **Exercise 2.5 (Use Primary Sources to Educate Your Questions)**
- **Exercise 2.6 (Make Your Assumptions Visible)**
- **Exercise 2.7 (Identify the Problem That Connects Your Questions)**

  Common **Mistakes**:

  - Asking vague, grand, abstract, or big-picture questions about "meaning" or "significance," instead of specific and **precise factual questions**
  - Not asking actual questions (with a question mark), but instead writing statements or sentence fragments – **topics masquerading as questions**
  - Not asking a question because **you think you couldn't answer it**, perhaps because you think that the data doesn't exist or is unattainable
  - Asking **too few questions**, resulting in an inadequate quantity of self-evidence

2.3 From Problems to Research Projects

- **Exercise 2.8 (Treat Your Primary Source Like a Cereal Box)**
- **Exercise 2.9 (Envision Your Primary Sources)**
- **Exercise 2.10 (Connect the Dots Using Your Sources)**

- **Exercise 2.11 (Decision Matrix)**
- **Exercise 2.12 (Prepare a Formal Research Proposal)**

2.4 Identifying Your Problem Collective

- **Exercise 2.13 (Change One Variable)**
- **Exercise 2.14 (Before and After)**
- **Exercise 2.15 (Map Out Your Collective (Secondary Source Search))**

2.5 Rewriting for Your Collective

- **Exercise 2.16 (Find and Replace All "Insider Language")**

2.6 Organizing Your Field into Problem Collectives

- **Exercise 2.17 (Start Your Own "What's Your Problem?" Bookstore)**
- **Exercise 2.18 (Change Their Variables)**

2.7 Rewriting for Your Field

- **Exercise 2.19 (Rewrite for Your Field)**

2.8 Formal Drafting and Revision

- **Exercise 2.20 (Create "Draft 0")**
- **Exercise 2.21 (Move from 0 to 1)**

2.9 What is Next?

- **Exercise 2.22 (Find a New Problem and Start a New Project)**
- **Exercise 2.23 (Help Someone Else)**

3 Sounding Board and Research Network

3.1 Building Research Network

- **Exercise 3.1 (Start Building Your Research Network)** *Start building your research network – a community of people you can consult with and seek advice from during the research process.*

    1. *Make a list of teachers, colleagues, students, and fellow travelers you think would be willing and available to discuss ideas with you on a periodic basis.*
    2. *Circle a couple of names on your list of potential Sounding Boards.*
    3. *Choose a few of the questions you've generated while reading this chapter, and make a meeting to discuss them.*

- *Tell them you're not trying to settle on a research question just yet.*
- *The goal is to get on their radar, and to start **the process of communicating** about your research ideas **orally** – since you've already done some writing.*
- *You could send them your questions in advance, but strive to make it a casual conversation.*
- *Spend some time generating questions about a topic together.*

4. *And say Thank you. You may well be seeking them out again.*

3.2 Identifying Primary Sources

- **Exercise 3.2 (Get Leads on Primary Sources)**

3.3 Decision Consulting and Proposal Sharing

- **Exercise 3.3 (Is Your Decision Matrix Complete?)**
- **Exercise 3.4 (Share Your Proposal with a Trusted Mentor (Who Understands How Prelimina**

3.4 Evaluation of Proposal from Outsider

- **Exercise 3.5 (Does the Lay Version of My Proposal Make Sense?)**

3.5 Finding a Sounding Board in Your Field

- **Exercise 3.6 (Find a Sounding Board in Your Field)**

3.6 Being Your Own Sounding Board

- **Exercise 3.7 (Talk to Yourself)**

4 Introduction

4.1 Self-Centered Research: A Manifesto

- In this book, we advocate a "self-centered" approach to research.
- ***Self-Centered Research*** is the following:
  - A ***practice*** of research that emphasizes the importance of setting out on the research journey from exactly where you are right now, and maintaining close contact with your own self – your instincts, your curiosities, and your biases– throughout the process.

    To be a "self- centered" researcher is to maintain your center of gravity over your own two feet at all times, and to ***avoid pursuing topics and questions*** *that you* ***imagine*** *might* ***please*** *some* ***imaginary, external judge****.*
  - An ***ethic*** of research that involves ***consciously acknowledging*** *and* ***assessing*** *your* ***abilities*** *and your* ***limitations*** as a researcher. It involves being *centered*: ***knowing*** *who you are*, ***listening to your own instincts***, ***trusting*** *them* even when they sound naive or inarticulate, and ***refining*** *them during the research process.*
  - A ***state*** of mind that ***affirms the value*** *of your ideas*, *assumptions*, and concerns in shaping your agenda and ***the direction of your research***. It presumes that the better (and faster) you figure out your own concerns and motivations as a researcher, the better (and faster) you will discover a research problem that is deeply meaningful both to you and to the world at large. But the first person who must be deeply concerned with your research problem is you, the *researcher*.
- *Self-Centered Research*
  - *does not* mean *unleashing (or inflating)* your *ego*. Being self-centered is not being self-absorbed, self-obsessed, self-congratulatory, self-consumed, self-indulgent, self-involved, self-serving, or self-ish.

    Quite the opposite: self-centered researchers are ***self-reflexive***, and always ***self-critical***; *honest* and *probing* about their own interests, motivations, and abilities; but also ***open*** and ***confident*** enough to *assess* the validity of others'. This means having the wherewithal to ***challenge*** received wisdom, including unfounded ideas you are probably carrying around without realizing it.
  - is also ***not autobiographical***.

    It does not imply that the papers, articles, reports, or books you write will tell the story of your life. Or that every documentary you produce, or painting you paint, will be a self-portrait.
- ***The end goal*** of the Self-Centered Research process is, just like conventional research processes, one in which the researcher produces empirical, grounded, theoretically informed, and compelling scholarship about some aspect of the world around us, and does so in a way that *changes* how *other* people think.
- In order to identify and solve a problem that truly matters to other people, however, the *Self-Centered Research process* insists that *this problem must matter, first and foremost, to* ***you***.

4.2 Centered Research Is the Best Research

- ***Where to begin?*** The answer is: ***Exactly where you are, right now.***
- Core to this book are two propositions.
  - First, research can be a *life-changing experience*, if you get a few things *right* from the *start.*
  - Second, the most important part of beginning a research project is ***finding your center.***
- Research is a process *not just* of *solving problems* but of ***finding problems that you*** – and other people – ***didn't know existed.***

  It's a process of *discovery*, *analysis*, and *creation* that can *generate its own momentum* and *create a virtuous cycle of inspiration.*

  Deep-seated problems only reveal themselves through ***self-trust***, ***exposure*** *to* ***primary sources***, and ***time.***
- ***Only you*** – not anyone else – can tell you *what you were meant to research.* Answering the question "What to research?" requires a *hard look in the mirror.*
- The ***goal*** of this book, then, is
  - to help you ***create the ideal conditions*** to start a fire in your mind.
  - But at the same time, it will show you how to ***maintain balance and clarity*** in situations of complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity.
  - And it will teach you ways to tell the difference between ***unproductive uncertainty*** – that is, when you're ***on the wrong path***, and should probably turn back – and ***productive uncertainty*** – that is, when it may feel like you're lost, but where your ***inner instinct*** and ***wisdom*** are *encouraging* you to keep on going.

4.3 How to Use this Book

- ***Try This Now***

  In each chapter, you will work through practical exercises and games designed to help you achieve a specific set of goals:
  - generating questions,
  - refining questions,
  - discovering the patterns that connect your questions, and
  - identifying the problem that motivates you.
- All of the exercises rely on a core set of principles. These include
  - ***attentive***, ***nonjudgmental self-observation***;
  - giving oneself permission and *encouragement* to say *inarticulate, tentative, and vulnerable things* out loud;
  - getting things ***down on paper.***

- Whether or not you tackle everything in sequence on your first pass, the only way to get the benefit of our advice is by completing the exercises, and, as mentioned above, by ***writing things down***.
- The point of all this *continual writing* is to *produce* what we term "evidence of self," or "***self-evidence***."

  You can think of self-evidence as clues that will help you figure out the answers to the most important questions that a researcher must answer during this early phase:

  - *Why am I concerned with this topic?*
  - *What is it about this subject that I think holds the key to some larger issue?*
  - *Why does this primary source jump out at me?*
  - *Why, out of all possible topics that I could be working on, do I keep coming back to this one?*
  - *What is my Problem?*
- ***Self-evidence*** is a valuable form of *note-taking* that we believe many researchers neglect.
- We advocate making ***introspection*** a *habitual part* of your research method.
- The pieces of *self-evidence* you produce during *the Self-Centered Research* process are cousins to the kind of *notes* experienced researchers routinely make when they read primary sources, conduct interviews, carry out ethnographic fieldwork, or copy down bibliographic information.

  We call them ***self-evidence*** because, ***during this early phase of research***, ***these notes*** *will possess a* ***value*** that goes far *beyond* the *recording* of facts, quotes, observations, and other evidence about the world around you. They will ***provide evidence about you yourself***.

  With these clues you will be able to *uncover the* ***hidden*** *questions and problems* you carry around inside you.

  Discover them early in the research process and not only will you *save yourself time and frustration*, but, more importantly, you will be more likely to *arrive at the research project that is* ***right for you***.
- ***Commonly Made Mistakes***

  A list of these follows each "*Try This Now*" exercise. Most of these mistakes fall into one of three categories:

  - Not letting yourself be ***vulnerable***
  - Not ***listening to yourself***
  - Not ***writing things down***
- ***Sounding Board***

  A ***Sounding Board*** is someone who helps you to gain *alternative perspectives* on your ideas and writings and to *step outside yourself*.

  - A *Sounding Board* helps you to ***self-reflect*** and *make better decisions*, so we recommend

that you make ***talking to someone you trust*** a habit early in the research process.

  - Ultimately, *the Self-Centered Research* process will empower you to ***become your own Sounding Board***.

- Well-meaning suggestions from a teacher, adviser, or other *authority* figure – suggestions as to what you "could" or "should" work on – can have a *major impact* on a researcher during the early phases of research. If you feel lost, or uncertain about the value of your nascent ideas, these suggestions can feel a lot like a ***command***. Or it may become your fallback, your "Well, I can't come up with anything better, so I might as well go with that!"

  What if you ***skipped*** all that messy ***introspection*** and snapped up the ready-made idea that your trusted adviser has told you is important? Unfortunately, the effect can be ***inhibitory*** and ***counterproductive***.

- The point of research is *not to fall back*, it's to ***move forward*** – to take a risk and discover or create something original.

- A **mentor** can ***offer advice*** that ***saves you from retracing others' paths*** to the same conclusion.

  But when a student comes with an idea for a research project and asks, "Is this what you want?" a true mentor's response is always the same: "***Is this what you want?***"

- In our experience, if a research question is *not* one that you're *truly motivated* to spend your time answering, you'll find it a *challenge* to do a good job, or even to finish.

4.4 Introversion, First. Extroversion Second

- The *two-part process* of starting a research project involves
  - looking first ***inward*** and
  - then ***outward***.

-
  - Part 1 takes you through the ***inward-focused process*** of becoming a self-centered researcher. You will ***reflect*** on the experiences, interests, priorities, and assumptions you bring with you – and assess how to make best use of them in charting out a research direction.

    This process goes beyond *conventional* ***brainstorming*** because it requires *taking stock of your* ***values***. It involves ***distinguishing*** between

    * ***what doesn't matter to you***,
    * ***what you think matters to you***, and
    * ***what really matters to you***.

    We believe that you are best off *starting* this process *before* you field-test your ideas against the wisdom of the research community.

  - Part 2 focuses on this process of ***extroversion***. It helps you to navigate the often bewildering process of coming to terms with the research communities conventionally known as "*fields*" and "*disciplines*," as well as how to identify researchers who may not

be in the same field as you but ***who are interested in similar problems*** – what we call your ***Problem Collective***.

- **Exercise 4.1** *Writting Exercise* – **Try This Now**

  All of the writing you do with (and in) this book will help the research process by

  - *creating an* **evolving record** *of your ideas— your "***self-evidence***";*
  - **continually externalizing** your thoughts*, as an aid to memory and to your research collaborators;*
  - *building your project* step-by-step *through different types of writing,* focused *on discrete aspects of the early phases of research;*
  - *making writing a* regular research habit

5 Become a Self-Centered Researcher

- Part 1 of this book guides you through the process of centering your research questions, of aligning them with the concerns that you carry inside you.
- You will *not be writing about yourself*, but rather from yourself, instead of *from external sources*. This is a *process of self-reflective decision-making* that is crucial at the inception stage of a research project.
- The ***goal*** of this stage is to make sure that you are fully aware of your own *motivations* and *values*, are confident of your *priorities*, and have taken stock of your *assets*, *capabilities*, and *limitations*.
- Part 1 teaches you how to avoid the ever- present risk of outsmarting yourself.

5.1 Questions

- This chapter helps you navigate the first challenge you will face in your research process:

  *How do you transform broad and vague "**topics**" of interest into a set of concrete and (for you, at least) fascinating **questions**?*

- In the earliest phases of research, most people don't have specific questions in mind. They have *topics of interest*.
- The main challenge is not identifying potential topics of interest, but in moving from these ***generic topics*** to a ***specific set of questions***.

5.1.1 A Topic Is Not a Question

- A ***topic*** suggests a *field* or *scope of inquiry*.
- Having a topic makes one feel *solid*, *self-aware*, *oriented*.
- Topics can be deceptive, however. They are immense and ***abstract*** categories.
- But their use to the researcher is limited for one very obvious reason: ***a topic is not a question***.

- You can see already how topics can even be ***obstacles*** to the research process. Simply put, when we speak about topics, we could be speaking about *anything* (and thus *nothing*) at all.
- By themselves, topics are not very good guides for the research process. That's why they can be dangerous.
- When you have a *topic* and are struggling to *turn it into a project*, the common advice you will hear is "***Narrow it down.***"
- We call this ***the Narrow-Down-Your-Topic Trap***.

  A more discrete scope that reduces the volume of sources you need to analyze can, to be sure, *answer the* ***when*** *and* ***where*** *questions.* But *a topic alone* – even a "narrow" one – is ***insufficient***, because it still leaves *unanswered the how and why questions.* Tell someone your "narrow" topic, and they may still have *no clue what you're doing.* ***Even a "narrow" topic cannot tell you what to do***.

  Simply put, you cannot "narrow" your way out of *Topic Land.*
- Every researcher needs to figure out ***what to do*** and ***how to do it***.

  the question that comes before *what* and *how* is ***why***.
- Besides, "gaps" in human knowledge are infinite. *Why fill this particular gap?*
- Most researchers (even seasoned ones) instinctually try to justify their incipient research ideas using the *vocabulary* of *"**importance**"* or *"**significance**" – as defined by an* ***imaginary, external judge***.
- *Out of the infinite number of potential topics of interest, why am I drawn to this one?*

  If I had to guess, what is my connection with this topic?

  Why is it so magnetic to me?
- Here's how we'd ***phrase*** them for a researcher trying to *move from a* ***topic to questions***:

  1. ***Make yourself vulnerable.*** The questions one generates during this early phase are ***not final products***.

     at this stage, our questions *don't need to be polished* or even *coherent.* All they have to be is ***honest***, ***to the best of our knowledge***. ***Trust*** *yourself.*

  2. ***Keep the conversation affirmative and nonjudgmental.*** *Neither* the researcher *nor* the *Sounding Board* said anything to *denigrate* the researcher's *assumptions* about rationality.

     At the *brainstorming* stage, it's easy to shut down lines of inquiry *prematurely.* Or perhaps by chiding oneself with high-level language. *Resist the temptation.* Far better is simply to *allow the questions to proliferate*, no matter how seemingly *unimportant*, *naive*, incoherent, scattered, or biased they might seem.

     Whether you're working alone or with someone else, the goal at this point is ***simply to generate questions***.

  3. ***Write down your ideas.*** The researcher and *Sounding Board wrote down all the*

questions as they spilled out.

As we will emphasize again and again, during this early phase of research, thinking about things is not enough. You need to ***get things down in writing***, to create ***traces of thought*** that you can later use for other purposes.

4. ***Generate questions internally.*** The questions you should be aiming at now are those ***driven by your own knowledge, assumptions, and curiosities***.

   At this point, don't try to think from the "outside in" by trying to *generate questions* you think might ***satisfy some imaginary judge***.

- For most of us, the challenge is greater. We might be drawn to a particular topic without having any idea why. Or, perhaps more accurately, ***some part of us knows why, but the rest of us*** – the part of us that has to field questions like "Why does that interest you?" – ***still has absolutely no idea***.

- You will learn how to bring together
  - the ***intuitive*** part of you that ***knows***, but ***cannot speak***;
  - the ***executive*** part of you that ***speaks***, but ***does not know***.

- ***Questions lead us in specific directions*** – whether toward ***specific answers*** or to ***primary sources*** that we need to answer the questions or to the work of fellow scholars who are grappling with similar questions (i.e., secondary sources) or, more often than not, to more and better questions.

- Questions have another virtue. Every question a person asks about the world is *a piece of* ***"self-evidence" about the researcher*** – evidence that helps the researcher ***reflect*** *on their own intellectual, emotional, and personal motivations* for asking the question in the first place.

- The *goal* here is to ***explain***, rather than simply assert, ***one's interest in a topic***.

  They require you to ask *probing questions* about yourself

- **Exercise 5.1 (Search Yourself)** *(check in early sections)*

  The ***goal****: To use a list of* ***primary-source search results*** *to figure out* ***the aspects of your topic*** *that* ***most interest you****, and* ***draft questions*** *based on these interests.*

  1.

  2.

  3. On most of these sites, you won't be able to view the original source, only the catalogue entry. But even if a site does offer full text results, try not to get caught up in any one source for too long at this point. This is not yet the time for close reading.

  Instead— and this is key— while scrolling through your search results, try to imagine that you are strapped to an EKG machine that is recording the electrical pulses going through your system as you read.

  Which primary sources raise your heart rate, even slightly? Write them down. Which ones have no effect on you one way or another? Take note of them too (since, a bit later

on, we will also be taking stock of things that bore you!).

*The goal right now, as we said above, is to "**read yourself**" as you read other things.*

Why bother? How does this get a researcher any closer to discovering their research direction?

Given how efficient we are at ignoring stimuli*, it follows that when we do take notice of something – however small or insignificant – we should* take notice that we're noticing*. This form of* self-evidence *gives a potential clue about our underlying concerns and curiosities.*

Put plainly, whenever your mind takes notice of something – anything – you can be certain that there is a question there, even if you are not sure what that question is.

*Learn to **pay attention to these clues**, and then to uncover the questions whose presence they indicate, and you'll be able to move quickly and effectively from generic topics to precise and generative questions.*

"Noticing what you are noticing" can be surprisingly difficult.

4. *Go back to your search results. Write down, circle, or asterisk the ones that seem to **have any effect on you**, however small.*

   Write a list out by hand, copy and paste the titles of the sources into a text file, or click a checkbox to save those sources in a folder or email. However you choose to do it, take notes.

5. *Once you have an initial list of at least ten items, take thirty minutes or so to ask yourself three questions about each item, setting down your answers in writing:*

   - *What does this make me think of?*
   - *If I had to venture a guess, why did I notice this one?*
   - *What questions come to mind for me when I look at this search result?*

   Your only audience is you, so allow yourself to be inarticulate, instinctual, and honest.

6.

7.

*Common **Mistakes**:*

- *Not writing things down*
- *Getting bogged down in **individual sources too soon***
- *Excluding "fluke" search results that **seem unrelated** to the keywords you entered in the database or unrelated to your topic*
- *Feigning interest in a search result that seems "**important**," even if it doesn't really interest you*
- *Only registering interest in search results for which **you think you know why** you're interested in them, instead of being more **inclusive***

- *Trying to make a list of noticings that is **coherent** and fits together*
- *When speculating about why a search result jumped out at you, worrying about whether or not the reason is "**important**," based on some **imagined external standard***

- **Exercise 5.2 (Let Boredom Be Your Guide)** *The **goal**: To become **attentive** to your **active dislikes**, identifying questions that you "should" (in theory) be interested in based on your topic of interest, but aren't. By **understanding what you don't care about** regarding your topic, you accelerate the process of figuring out what you do care about.*

  *After all, the most common reaction human beings have to **boredom** is **avoidance**. We try to dismiss or ignore things that bore us.*

  ***Boredom is a powerful teacher**, and **deserves our attention**. Boredom is not the same thing as disinterest or lack of interest. It is not a passive experience.*

  *Boredom is an **active sentiment**, a **rejection** of something that, like excitement, provides you with more self-evidence through which you can understand your concerns and motivations more clearly.*

  *By **taking note of your boredom** – in precisely the same way you just did with your excitement – you will gain clues about what your real research questions and problems might be.*

  Ask yourself:

  - *What about your chosen topic bores you?*
  - *Among the potential questions or subtopics that derive quite naturally and obviously from your stated topic, which ones repel you, perhaps even unnerve you?*

  *Taking account of your boredom is part of your conversation with your research-self. Besides helping the process of **elimination**, steering you away from **unprofitable lines of inquiry**, boredom can also help you to ask better questions and zero in on your Problem.*

  Common **Mistakes**:

  - Denying boredom, or feigning interest in something because you feel it's "on topic" and demands your interest because it's "important."
  - Engaging in circular logic.

    Boredom, like inspiration, is a dynamic process that happens between you and whatever it is you're interacting with. The sensation of boredom is the by-product of reactions between the substance that makes you you, and the substances of the reality you're encountering.

- **Exercise 5.3 (Go Small or Go Home)** *The **goal**: To generate **specific, fact-focused questions** about your topic before you've done in-depth research. These will lead to bigger questions later on.*

  *Try to **avoid** posing questions that strive to be **profound** or too **big-picture**. If you find yourself asking questions about the essential "meaning" or "significance" of your topic, chances are you are thinking too abstractly.*

*Remember, too that question means question – **with a question mark** – and not a statement or sentence fragment masquerading as a question.*

*Again, your goal here is not to **justify** the significance of your project **to someone else**. You need to start with questions about **basic facts**.*

***Specificity** is the goal at this point, for two reasons*

- *First, it is only through small questions like these that you can begin to **form a picture in your mind** (and in your notebook) about the **core fundamentals** of the topic you are researching.*

  *To try and answer "profound" questions at this point – about "meaning" and "significance" – is **premature**, since you don't yet have the facts, much less the opportunity, to analyze them.*

  By contrast, the more facts you know the greater command you begin to have of your subject matter. This, in turn, prepares you for the process of asking "bigger" questions – "profound" questions – when the time is right.

- *Second, lurking in one or more of those "small" questions may be an **unexpected question** that could, when you hear yourself ask it aloud, send your research off into an entirely **new direction**.*

*When you begin to ask (and then to answer) precise and seemingly **mundane** questions like these, you begin to **liberate yourself** from the confines of **vague** and **unproductive** "**topics**," moving instead toward specific and coherent clusters of questions that will, over time, add up to something compelling, **open-ended**, and **doable**.*

*Asking **precise factual questions** is one **key** to **escaping Topic Land**.*

Common **Mistakes**:

- Asking vague, grand, abstract, or big-picture questions about "meaning" or "significance," instead of specific and **precise factual questions**
- Not asking actual questions (with a question mark), but instead writing statements or sentence fragments – **topics masquerading as questions**
- Not asking a question because **you think you couldn't answer it**, perhaps because you think that the data doesn't exist or is unattainable
- Asking **too few questions**, resulting in an inadequate quantity of self-evidence

- Most importantly, in formulating these possible research questions, you've set aside for the time being any *concerns* about *whether or not your questions are Important*, with a capital *I*.
- Your list of questions contains questions that ***matter to you***, even if you don't know why yet.
- As a bonus, you also have *an initial set of primary and secondary sources* from your database searches.

5.2 What's Your Problem?

5.3 Designing a Project that Works

6 Get Over Yourself

- Your project matters to you. ***Does it matter to the world?***
- Why should we engage with other researchers?
  - Getting over yourself is a movement from a more ***narrow*** *understanding of self* to a *more* ***expansive*** *one*. This process of exploration, discovery, and accretion is based on ***engagement***.

    Far from losing your sense of self, seeing your ideas in relation to others' can help you to *learn even more about yourself*.
  - Another reason to get over yourself is entirely ***pragmatic***: none of us, even when we do much of our work alone, inhabit a research community of one.

    In the creation of any new research, we rely on the *ideas of predecessors and peers*.

    One of the most important conversations you'll be joining is with the broader community of researchers who work on the same topic as you— a community commonly referred to as a "*field*."
- The overarching ***goal*** for part 2 is to *become aware of how* ***other people's agendas and questions intersect with our own***, and to ***make the most of those relationships***.
- Research is never a monologue, and your research identity is not static.
- You have to navigate your *Field* (and might change or add Fields), which involves interacting with different *Problem Collectives*.
- Doing so requires remaining ***mobile*** and ***open-minded***. Yet the key to engaging with the ideas of others is to ***maintain your own sense of centeredness***.
- Once again, you'll be stress-testing your ideas, assumptions, and theories, but this time you'll be doing so using the ideas, assumptions, and theories of others.
- You will ***make other people's ideas your own***. Eventually, you'll help other people ***make your ideas their own***.

6.1 How to Find Your Problem Collective

6.2 How to Navigate Your Field

6.3 How to Begin

7 What's Next in Your Research Journey?