

# Research Essentials: A Primer on Crafting Topics, Posing Questions, Hypothesizing, and Examining Literature in Social Sciences.

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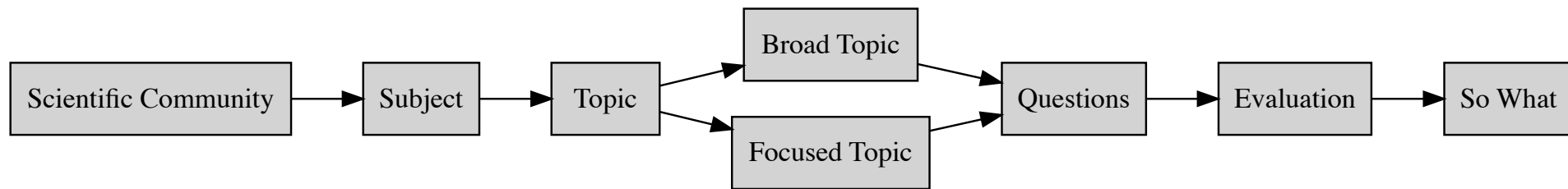
# Main Content

- You cannot design research without knowing what you are researching.
  - This lesson guides the definition of a research topic, showing what it means to identify this.
- **Practical outcome** from the class: identify a topic and define the working group.
  - The topic chosen is not important (it is not evaluated). It is simply a topic that can be worked on.
  - Name the group and indicate it next to the members in the Topics and Groups table you find on Moodle.
    - Deadline: by the next class.

# Key Ideas

- Scientific activity is situated in a social context (the scientific community) that defines its rules and represents the audience for scientific work.
- In articulating research questions and planning their response through appropriate research designs and methods, the context in which the research is situated must be considered.
  - Properly reading this context allows one to identify the main coordinates according to which one's work can contribute to the scientific community and be evaluated.

# Road Map



# Subjects and Topics

- Every research is about a **subject** (a general area of scientific knowledge within a discipline), and a **topic** (a specific interest within that area).
  - A topic is an area of knowledge specific enough that you can imagine becoming a local expert on it (“topic” comes from *topos*, Greek for “place”).
    - The topic can be identified differently depending on experience in the field (e.g., topics in which one has a personal interest, or topics that the researcher knows the scientific community is focusing on)

# Subjects and Topics

- **Subject:** Media Effects
  - **Topic:** The impact of violent video games on adolescent aggression.
  - **Topic:** The influence of social media on body image perceptions among young women.
- **Subject:** Political Communication
  - **Topic:** The role of fake news in shaping voting behavior.
  - **Topic:** Effects of political advertisements on voter turnout.

# Subjects in Communication Science

**Media Studies** (Media effects, Media literacy, Media convergence, History of media); **Political Communication** (Propaganda and persuasion, Political campaigns, Media and democracy, Political discourse analysis); **Interpersonal Communication** (Non-verbal communication, Relationship communication, Conflict resolution, Group dynamics); **Organizational Communication** (Corporate communication, Crisis communication, Leadership communication, Internal communication); **Health Communication** (Health campaigns, Patient-provider communication, Health literacy, Health risk communication); **Digital Communication and Social Media** (Online

# Subjects in Communication Science

**Intercultural Communication** (Cross-cultural communication practices, Language and communication, Communication barriers in multicultural settings, Cultural adaptation and assimilation); **Public Relations** (PR strategies and tactics, Reputation management, Crisis PR, Corporate social responsibility); **Advertising and Marketing Communication** (Consumer behavior, Branding and brand communication, Integrated marketing communication, Audience analysis); **Mass Communication** (Journalism studies, Broadcasting, Theories of mass communication, Gatekeeping and agenda-setting); **Communication Theory and Philosophy** (Semiotics and sign theory, Rhetorical theory, Critical theory, Feminist and postcolonial theories of communication)



# Subjects in Communication Science

**Visual Communication** (Film studies, Photography analysis, Graphic design and communication, Multimedia storytelling); **Science and Environmental Communication** (Public understanding of science, Communication strategies for environmental issues, Media portrayals of scientific events, Risk communication in science); **Instructional and Educational Communication** (Communication in the classroom, Instructional design and technology, Learning theories and communication, Distance and online learning communication dynamics); **Communication Ethics and Law** (Media law and policy, Ethical issues in PR and advertising, Freedom of speech and censorship, Privacy, surveillance, and communication); **Communication Research Methods** (Quantitative research methods, Qualitative research

# Subjects in Communication Science and Senior Scholars at University of Vienna

<https://publizistik.univie.ac.at/en/departments/staff/professors-senior-staff/>

# Screen the Literature to Identify/Refine a Topic

- Think of a subject and topic of interest
- Bird's-eye view of the topic as treated in the scientific literature:
  - Screen the literature using Google Scholar or the University scientific database
  - Use renowned handbooks or encyclopedias

# From Broad to Focused Topics

- Some suggest enriching the topic by articulating it through the use of nouns derived from verbs, which express action or relationship (e.g., to conflict, to describe, to contribute, and to develop).
  - This serves to relate the specific concepts of the topic to others, and to make the topic more focused and interesting.
    - Free will in Tolstoy (broad topic) → There's free will in Tolstoy (claim)
    - The *conflict between* free will and destiny in Tolstoy's *description* of three battles in War and Peace (focused topic) → In War and Peace, Tolstoy describes three battles in which free will and destiny conflict (focused claim)

# From Topic to Questions

- Even a focused topic is not enough to start a search. At least one **research question** is needed. A well-articulated research question allows for the **oriented collection of evidence** to provide an answer.
  - In the absence of a question, evidence can only be collected in an a-systematic and inconsistent manner.
- Research questions can take various forms, including **Who, What, When, Where, How, and Why**.
  - Questions starting with Who, What, When, and Where often lead to descriptive analysis, while those starting with How and Why typically result in more nuanced and detailed analysis.

# From Topic to Questions

Thinking carefully about your topic from different points of view can help you identify interesting questions. Try to ask questions on the:

- **history of the topic** (broader developmental context and internal history); **structure and composition** (how the topic fits into the context of a larger structure or system, or functions as part of a system); **categories and subcategories** (how can the topic be grouped into typologies and how does it compare and contrast with similar ones?)

# From Topic to Questions

Also try to **turn positive questions into negative ones**; ask **speculative questions (what if?)**; use **questions suggested by sources** (expand the scope of a claim, support it with new evidence; ask questions similar to what has been asked on similar topics); ask **questions based on disagreement**; ask questions **asked but not answered**.

# Evaluate the Questions

Not all questions are equally good. Some are trivial or dead ends:

- Questions whose answer are settled facts that you could just look up (often times, descriptive questions).
- Questions with merely speculative answer, without empirical data that might settle the question.
- Questions with dead end answers, which don't help us thinking to broader and more relevant issues.



# So What?

“So What” is the crucial question.

- **So what if we don't answer the question? What do we lose?**
  - This question helps to highlight the **scientific contribution** of your query.
  - You can't always begin a research study with the answer to this question, but you'll need to address it sooner or later

# So What?

# So What? Examples

**Subject:** Media Effects - **Broad Topic:** Media Consumption and Societal Impacts - **Focused Topic of Inquiry:** Influence of media on political polarization

- I am studying **the relationship between media consumption and political polarization** because I want to find out how different news sources influence viewers' political perspectives and beliefs. My primary goal is to address the broader scientific concern of **how media structures and content can shape societal divisions and influence democratic processes**. This understanding will also be of practical importance to policymakers and the general public to navigate and mitigate the widening political divide.

# So What? Examples

**Subject:** Health Communication - **Broad Topic:** Strategies in Health Messaging - **Focused Topic of Inquiry:** Effectiveness of anti-smoking campaigns

# So What? Examples

**Subject:** Political Communication - **Broad Topic:** Media Strategies in Politics - **Focused Topic of Inquiry:** Framing techniques in campaign advertisements

- I am studying **the framing techniques used in political campaign advertisements** because I want to find out how different frames can shape voters' perceptions of candidates and policy issues. The primary aim is to elucidate the broader theoretical issue of **how communication frames shape cognition, emotions, and behavior in the political realm**. On a practical level, this understanding will benefit political strategists and the electorate by highlighting the nuances of framing effects on public opinion.

# Sociology of Scientific Knowledge

The interest of a research question (and its answer) therefore strongly depends on the **scientific community that evaluates it**. There are scientific and “objective” elements in evaluating the value of research, but also sociological elements.

For a disenchanted (almost cynical) and typically sociological look at the scientific enterprise you can read for example Bourdieu, P. (1975). *The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the progress of reason*. Social science information, 14(6), 19-47.

What is regarded as important and interesting is what is likely to be recognised by others as important and interesting, and thus to make the man who produces it appear more important and interesting in the eyes of others.

# Bibliography

- Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., & Williams, J. M. (2003). *The craft of research*. University of Chicago
- Bourdieu, P. (1975). The specificity of the scientific field and the social conditions of the progress of reason. *Social science information*, 14(6), 19-47 (On Moodle or at <https://www2.philosophy.su.se/carlshamre/texter/Bourdieu.pdf>)

## Other resources:

- What Constitutes a “Good Contribution” to the Body of Knowledge?  
[https://fyics.ifas.ufl.edu/swisher/00\\_6800\\_22\\_DE/What\\_Constitutes\\_Good](https://fyics.ifas.ufl.edu/swisher/00_6800_22_DE/What_Constitutes_Good)
- How to Read a Paper  
<https://web.stanford.edu/class/ee384m/Handouts/HowtoReadPaper.pdf>

