

# HOW TO SELECT A RESEARCH TOPIC

## Selecting a Topic

The ability to develop a good research topic is an important skill. An instructor may assign you a specific topic, but most often instructors require you to select your own topic of interest. When deciding on a topic, there are a few things that you will need to do:

- brainstorm for ideas
- choose a topic that will enable you to read and understand the literature
- ensure that the topic is manageable and that material is available
- make a list of key words
- be flexible
- define your topic as a focused research question
- research and read more about your topic
- formulate a thesis statement

Be aware that selecting a good topic may not be easy. It must be narrow and focused enough to be interesting, yet broad enough to find adequate information. Before selecting your topic, make sure you know what your final project should look like. Each class or instructor will likely require a different format or style of research project.

Use the steps below to guide you through the process of selecting a research topic.

## Step 1: Brainstorm for ideas

Choose a topic that interests you. Use the following questions to help generate topic ideas.

- Do you have a strong opinion on a current social or political controversy?
- Did you read or see a news story recently that has piqued your interest or made you angry or anxious?
- Do you have a personal issue, problem or interest that you would like to know more about?
- Do you have a research paper due for a class this semester?
- Is there an aspect of a class that you are interested in learning more about?

Look at some of the following topically oriented Web sites and research sites for ideas.

- Are you interested in current events, government, politics or the social sciences?
  - Try Washington File
- Are you interested in health or medicine?
  - Look in Healthfinder.gov, Health & Wellness Resource Center or the National Library of Medicine
- Are you interested in the Humanities; art, literature, music?
  - Browse links from the National Endowment for the Humanities
- For other subject areas try:

- the Scout Report or the New York Times/ College Web site

Write down any key words or concepts that may be of interest to you. Could these terms help be used to form a more focused research topic?

Be aware of overused ideas when deciding a topic. You may wish to avoid topics such as, abortion, gun control, teen pregnancy, or suicide unless you feel you have a unique approach to the topic. Ask the instructor for ideas if you feel you are stuck or need additional guidance.

## Step 2: Read General Background Information

- Read a general encyclopedia article on the top two or three topics you are considering. Reading a broad summary enables you to get an overview of the topic and see how your idea relates to broader, narrower, and related issues. It also provides a great source for finding words commonly used to describe the topic. These keywords may be very useful to your later research. If you can't find an article on your topic, try using broader terms and ask for help from a librarian.

For example, the Encyclopedia Britannica Online (or the printed version of this encyclopedia, in Thompson Library's Reference Collection on Reference Table 1) may not have an article on Social and Political Implications of Jackie Robinsons Breaking of the Color Barrier in Major League Baseball but there will be articles on baseball history and on Jackie Robinson.

Browse the Encyclopedia Americana for information on your topic ideas. Notice that both online encyclopedias provide links to magazine articles and Web sites. These are listed in the left or the right margins.

- Use periodical indexes to scan current magazine, journal or newspaper articles on your topic. Ask a librarian if they can help you to browse articles on your topics of interest.
- Use Web search engines. Google and Bing are currently considered to be two of the best search engines to find web sites on the topic.

## Step 3: Focus on Your Topic

Keep it manageable

A topic will be very difficult to research if it is too broad or narrow. One way to narrow a broad topic such as "the environment" is to limit your topic. Some common ways to limit a topic are:

- by geographical area  
Example: What environmental issues are most important in the Southwestern United States
- by culture  
Example: How does the environment fit into the Navajo world view?

- by time frame:

Example: What are the most prominent environmental issues of the last 10 years?

- by discipline

Example: How does environmental awareness effect business practices today?

- by population group

Example: What are the effects of air pollution on senior citizens?

Remember that a topic may be too difficult to research if it is too:

- locally confined - Topics this specific may only be covered in these (local) newspapers, if at all.

Example: What sources of pollution affect the Genesee County water supply?

- recent - If a topic is quite recent, books or journal articles may not be available, but newspaper or magazine articles may. Also, Web sites related to the topic may or may not be available.

broadly interdisciplinary - You could be overwhelmed with superficial information.

Example: How can the environment contribute to the culture, politics and society of the Western states?

- popular - You will only find very popular articles about some topics such as sports figures and high-profile celebrities and musicians.

If you have any difficulties or questions with focusing your topic, discuss the topic with your instructor, or with a librarian

## Step 4: Make a List of Useful Keywords

Keep track of the words that are used to describe your topic.

- Look for words that best describe your topic
- Look for them in when reading encyclopedia articles and background and general information
- Find broader and narrower terms, synonyms, key concepts for key words to widen your search capabilities
- Make note of these words and use them later when searching databases and catalogs

## Step 5: Be Flexible

It is common to modify your topic during the research process. You can never be sure of what you may find. You may find too much and need to narrow your focus, or too little and need to broaden your focus. This is a normal part of the research process. When researching, you may not wish to

change your topic, but you may decide that some other aspect of the topic is more interesting or manageable.

Keep in mind the assigned length of the research paper, project, bibliography or other research assignment. Be aware of the depth of coverage needed and the due date. These important factors may help you decide how much and when you will modify your topic. Your instructor will probably provide specific requirements, if not the table below may provide a rough guide:

| Assigned Length of Research Paper or Project | Suggested guidelines for approximate number and types of sources needed      |
|--|--|
| 1-2 page paper                               | 2-3 magazine articles or Web sites   |
| 3-5 page paper                               | 4-8 items, including book, articles (scholarly and/or popular) and Web sites |
| Annotated Bibliography                       | 6-15 items including books, scholarly articles, Web sites and other items    |
| 10-15 page research paper                    | 12-20 items, including books, scholarly articles, web sites and other items  |

## Step 6: Define Your Topic as a Focused Research Question

You will often begin with a word, develop a more focused interest in an aspect of something relating to that word, then begin to have questions about the topic.

For example:

- Ideas = Frank Lloyd Wright or modern architecture
- Research Question = How has Frank Lloyd Wright influenced modern architecture?
- Focused Research Question = What design principles used by Frank Lloyd Wright are common in contemporary homes?

## Step 7: Research and Read More About Your Topic

Use the key words you have gathered to research in the catalog, article databases, and Internet search engines. Find more information to help you answer your research question.

You will need to do some research and reading before you select your final topic. Can you find enough information to answer your research question? Remember, selecting a topic is an important and complex part of the research process.

## Step 8: Formulate a Thesis Statement

Write your topic as a thesis statement. This may be the answer to your research question and/or a way to clearly state the purpose of your research. Your thesis statement will usually be one or two sentences that states precisely what is to be answered, proven, or what you will inform your audience about your topic.

The development of a thesis assumes there is sufficient evidence to support the thesis statement.

For example, a thesis statement could be: Frank Lloyd Wright's design principles, including his use of ornamental detail and his sense of space and texture opened a new era of American architecture. His work has influenced contemporary residential design.

The title of your paper may not be exactly the same as your research question or your thesis statement, but the title should clearly convey the focus, purpose and meaning of your research.

For example, a title could be: Frank Lloyd Wright: Key Principles of Design For the Modern Home

Remember to follow any specific instructions from your instructor.

## Practical Exercises to Extend Your Learning

Identify three narrower aspects of the following broad topics. In other words, what are three areas you could investigate that fit into these very broad topics?

- Sports
- Pollution
- Politics

Identify a broader topic that would cover the following narrow topics. In other words, how could you expand these topics to find more information?

Menus in Michigan prisons

Urban planning in Flint

Imagine that you have been assigned the following topics. Think of 5 keywords you might use to look for information on each.

- How does air quality affect our health?
- What are the barriers to peace in the Middle East?
- Should snowmobiling be allowed in wilderness areas?
- How can welfare reform help poor children?