**Tips for Getting Started Choosing a Research Topic**

The key to getting started on choosing a research topic is to familiarize yourself with the literature in the area you are interested in working on at a broad level and then gradually narrowing your topic down. Mark Thomas of Data and Visualization Services will be in class within the next week to discuss tools like EconLit that the library has available to help you do this. I’ve also given you a list of journals and other sources you can use to search for relevant literature. There are two particularly useful sources on this list that I want to discuss in some detail.

First, North-Holland publishes a series of “Handbooks in Economics.” There are several volumes in each of the major fields in economics. There is a *Handbook of Macroeconomics*, a *Handbook of International Economics*, a *Handbook of Labor Economics*, etc. Each of these handbooks consists of about twenty lengthy survey articles on major research areas in the field. For example, the *Handbook of International Economics* has chapters on balance of payments crises, the behavior of exchange rates, international capital mobility, and purchasing power parity. Each individual survey is divided into even narrower sections dealing with research on that topic. For instance, the chapter on exchange rate behavior might discuss the various models of exchange rate determination, different approaches to empirical work, and work on special topics like dual exchange rate regimes. The way to use these surveys is to skim through them to get an idea of the research being done on a given topic and see what looks interesting to you. Then read that section carefully and use it to track down (1) what appear to be the seminal papers in the area and (2) the most recent papers cited. Follow up by taking a look at these papers and seeing where you might find an opportunity to make a contribution. **Pay particular attention to data sources**—you want, as much as possible, to have data that is publicly available. I can’t emphasize this point enough!

A second resource is nber.org. Many leading economists are members of the NBER and post their working papers there. Since there is a considerable lag between the time a paper is written and the time it is published in a journal, looking at working papers is the only way to stay on top of the very latest research on a topic.

Once you’ve done some preliminary searching of these and other sources, you will begin to have a good idea of who some of the key researchers in the area are. You should use this information to go to their websites and see what they are currently working on that might relate to your topic.

The process of choosing a topic and narrowing it down to a point where you can make a contribution can seem daunting. However, keeping in mind a couple of key points can help you keep you sanity. First, you don’t have to invent the wheel or discover fire. Most first-rate economists build their careers by extending our knowledge at the margins rather than providing great leaps forward. This means key contributions often take the form of extending the period or countries or industries covered by the empirical work in the field. Second, the process of narrowing down your topic can take some time. I don’t expect most of you to have completely narrowed down and finalized your topic until the time the initial research proposal (second paper) is due.

Just to give an example of how the process might work, suppose you are interested in working on the effects of the minimum wage (or even something broader than this). You can look at the *Handbook of Labor Economics*, and the NBER website and find that the effects of the minimum wage on youth unemployment is a topic of interest and that David Card is a key researcher in the area who has done work on the effects of the minimum wage on the fast food industry. After looking at some of his papers and other literature, maybe you realize you can update these studies to include more recent data or look at retail sales instead of the fast food industry. Or perhaps there are better econometric models or methods that can be brought to bear on the topic.