

PART 1: WHAT'S YOUR TOPIC?

Hello and welcome to What's Your Topic, Part 1 of Research 101. I'm Christy, and today we're going to focus on some of the steps involved in selecting, investigating, and refining your topic.

But first things first...

WHY TALK ABOUT TOPIC SELECTION?

There's no way to get around the fact that searching for and locating information can take a lot of time and effort. Unfortunately, a lot of that time and effort can be wasted if you haven't first spent enough time investigating and refining your topic. Good research papers are built upon the early work you'll do in this first stage of the research process, so you don't want to blow it off.

Today we'll focus on 4 important steps in the topic selection process:

1. ANALYZING YOUR ASSIGNMENT,
2. GENERATING TOPIC IDEAS
3. REFINING YOUR TOPIC, AND
4. FORMULATING YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION

ANALYZING YOUR ASSIGNMENT

So the first step in the topic selection process is analyzing your assignment. While it might seem like a no-brainer to carefully read your assignment before doing research for your class, the fact is, it's not at all uncommon for students to earn bad grades on assignments simply because they didn't do what the assignment asked them to do. For example, if you write a paper that argues for a specific way of understanding conflicts in the Middle East when the assignment asked you to compare and contrast local political conflicts in two Midwestern U.S. states, you are unlikely to be very happy with your grade.

Earning a poor grade not because your paper was bad per se but because it didn't fulfill the requirements of the assignment can be really discouraging. So don't let this happen to you. Instead, take the time to get to know your assignment. Keeping the following categories in mind will save you time and energy in the long-run:

1. LENGTH
2. TYPE
3. TOPIC
4. SOURCES
5. FORMATTING

LENGTH

The first thing to think about when analyzing your assignment is **Length**: How long is the assignment? If the assignment calls for 5 pages, then aim for five pages. Turning in 2 pages or 10 pages will not meet the requirements of the assignment.

TYPE

The next thing to keep in mind is the **Type** of assignment: Are you being asked to write a report, develop a comparison/contrast speech, or construct an argument? For example, reports generally just provide readers with facts. So a report about diabetes might present information about symptoms, the different disease types, diagnoses, and treatment. A comparison and contrast paper on diabetes might look at the similarities and differences between Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes. In contrast, an argumentative paper about diabetes will take a position about which reasonable people will disagree. For example, one might argue that U.S. doctors should be required to inform diabetic patients about alternative medical treatments that can help stabilize insulin levels. Not everyone is going to agree with that claim. Some might argue that doctors in the U.S. should not be required to inform patients about alternative medical treatments, since some have not been proven to be effective. Others might take the position that it is the patient's responsibility, and not the doctor's, to research treatment options that fall outside of the scope of traditional western medicine. And the list of possible arguments goes on...

TOPIC

You also want to think about the **Topic** you've been assigned: Have you been assigned a specific topic that you can begin researching right away; have you been assigned a general topic that you'll have to narrow down; or have you been asked to come up with your own topic?" Also, are there certain topics that are prohibited?

SOURCES

Another thing to pay attention to is whether or not specific kinds of **Sources** are required: Are you required to use materials from books, scholarly journal articles, newspapers, or websites? If there are no specific requirements, you'll still want to think about the kinds of sources it makes sense to use. For example, if I'm writing about last week's earthquake, I'll probably want to cite current and reliable sources like articles from respected newspapers, but if I'm writing about the linguistic construction of gender in Shakespeare's Hamlet, I'll turn to scholarly journal articles and books.

FORMATTING

Finally, consider **formatting** issues: What formatting guidelines are there? Are you being asked to use the MLA, APA, Chicago, or some other style?

Ok, so let's say your professor gives you the following research assignment.

Write a 5 page paper that constructs a specific argument related to the general issue of poverty in America. Your paper should engage with the text we've been reading, Barbara Ehrenreich's Nickel and Dimed. Your paper should also use at least three additional scholarly sources to develop your argument (scholarly journal articles are your best bet here, though books are fine too). Use specific quotations from these sources either to support your own argument or to address a counterargument that you proceed to refute. Cite all sources on a works cited page, using the MLA format.

Now, let's analyze the assignment in terms of the general categories I previously described.

LENGTH:

Always pay attention to the page length—in this case, 5 pages. You don't want to get points docked for not meeting the page requirement.

TYPE

The assignment also asks you to construct an argument, which means you are not just writing a descriptive report recounting facts about poverty. Rather, you will be taking a position on a poverty related issue about which reasonable people disagree.

TOPIC

This assignment provides a general topic—poverty in America. But that topic is much too broad for a 5 page paper. What about poverty? What aspect of poverty are you interested in? The working poor? Child poverty? Migrant Workers?

SOURCES

In this case, the assignment says to use the course text, *Nickel and Dimed*, and 3 scholarly sources, which could be either academic journals or books. Best to avoid newspapers, magazines, and random websites that are not affiliated with an established scholar or scholarly organization.

FORMATTING

The assignment asks you to use the MLA format, which is a style for writing papers and citing sources that is most common within the liberal arts and humanities. The book entitled *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* can help you format your paper and cite your sources correctly. Purdue's Online Writing Lab also (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/>) has a lot of helpful information for using the MLA format as well.

GENERATING TOPIC IDEAS

Ok, so we've talked about the first step in the topic selection process, analyzing your assignment. Now it's time to move on to the second step, generating topic ideas.

There will be times when you are given a specific topic to write about, but other times you will be asked to come up with your own. And though many people think that they'd prefer to select their own topic, when they are suddenly asked to do so, it's not unusual for their minds to immediately go completely blank.

One way to generate topic ideas is to brainstorm with your friends, family, fellow students, and professors. Depending on your assignment, you might also go online and browse news stories. For example, if your assignment asks you to research a current issue in the business world, you could go to the business section of Google News to browse recent business news stories. Wikipedia's main page can also help you generate topic ideas. Check out their "Today's featured article," "In the news," "Did you know," "On this day...," and "Today's featured picture" sections.

USING LIBRARY RESOURCES TO GENERATE TOPIC IDEAS

There are also some great library resources that can help you generate topic ideas.

For example, if your assignment calls on you to write a paper about what could be considered a current and/or controversial issue, the *CQ Researcher* is an excellent tool to help you select a workable topic. This weekly online publication covers the most current and controversial issues of the day with complete summaries, insight into different sides of the issues, lists of relevant sources, and more. Keep in mind that The *CQ Researcher* Online is a subscription database that the library pays for. In other words, you access it online, but it's not available on the web for free. Rather, you can use it on campus or access it from home with your library password. Let me show you.

- From the library homepage (<http://www.csupomona.edu/~library/>), click on the "Databases" link at the top of the page.
- Under the "Browse Databases by Title" heading, click on the letter C.
- Select *CQ Researcher* Plus Archive from the list.

- If you are accessing the database from home, type in your name, Bronco ID number, and your library PIN.

Don't know what your Library PIN is? [Click here](#).

USING THE CQ RESEARCHER TO FIND A TOPIC

- If you don't already have a general topic in mind, you can look for one by clicking the "Browse by Topic" link located on the left side of the screen.
- Then click on a general topic of interest to view more specific related topics.
- For example, clicking on Employment, Labor, and Income gives me a list of narrower topics, including Labor Standards and Practices. Clicking on the selected narrower topic leads me to a list of relevant reports, such as "Corporate Social Responsibility."

REFINING YOUR TOPIC

The next step in the topic selection process is refining your topic. If you are working on a current and/or controversial topic, the *CQ Researcher* can also help you narrow a general topic to a more manageable focus.

- For example, if you've selected or been assigned a general topic like poverty, you could search for the term in the Quick Search box.
- A list of reports that have something to do with poverty appear. This list already begins the process of narrowing your topic from the broad issue of poverty to more specific issues like child poverty and the working poor.
- Click on a report to learn more about a topic that interests you.
- For example, if you click on the Child Poverty report, you'll immediately see an even narrower focus: Did welfare reform help poor children? This is a workable topic that you could construct an argument about.
- Scroll through the text and you'll see headings indicating that the report explores other questions that you could choose as a topic instead, such as "*Would increasing the minimum wage help alleviate child poverty?*" and "*Should faith-based solutions be relied on more to solve the child-poverty problem?*"

USING SUBJECT SPECIFIC DATABASES

You can also refine your topic by using one of the library's Subject Specific Databases.

If you are writing a paper that is geared toward a specific academic discipline, you can do some preliminary research in a subject specific database in order to get a better sense of the more specific topics people in the field are writing about.

From the library homepage, click on the Databases link. If I'm writing a paper for a business class, I could select Business from the dropdown menu in order to narrow the list of databases to those that are relevant to Business. I'm looking for business journals so I'll select Business Full text. I'm going to limit my search to "peer reviewed" journals so that I can get a sense of what scholars are talking about on my subject. I'm interested in the general topic of subprime loans, so I'll type that into the search box.

I can now browse through the articles to get a sense of the specific topics people are discussing. In this case, I might want to narrow my topic to something like the efficacy of state anti-predatory lending laws.

FORMULATING A RESEARCH QUESTION

The next step in the topic selection process is formulating a research question. Formulating a research question is a good idea because it provides you with a clear direction for your research. In other words, your research will be focused on answering your question, and the answer you arrive at will be your thesis. Your thesis is the main argument or guiding direction of your paper. Keep in mind that you should not be able to answer your research question with a simple yes or no.

So the question, "*have some baseball players used performance enhancing drugs?*" is not a particularly good research question, since we know that some baseball players have indeed used performance enhancing drugs. This is simply a fact. A paper that just tells the reader that baseball players have done drugs and then lists the names of some of the offending players, based on statements you found in some newspapers and books, would amount to a factual report that did not require much, if any, original thought from you. Although you may sometimes be asked to write these basic kinds of reports at the college level, more often than not, you will be asked to write papers that involve higher level thinking skills, including analysis and evaluation. In other words, you will be asked to study issues about which people disagree, to become informed about different perspectives on the issue, and then to determine which perspectives make the most sense to you.

So a better research question than *have some players used drugs* would be "*what policies might be put into place that could stem the use of performance enhancing drugs in major league baseball?*" This question cannot be answered with a yes or a no and it addresses an issue about which reasonable people disagree. Research on this question would focus on finding out what experts say about policies that might halt the use of doping in baseball and then determining which ones seem to make the most sense.

Let's look at a couple more examples.

Which of the following is a better research question?

1. WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF A DECLINE IN READING?
2. WHY DO PEOPLE READ?

Question 1 is the better research question because it narrows the general topic of reading to a more specific focus--the social consequences associated with the decline of reading. Question 2, Why do people read, is too broad.

Let's try another one.

Which of the examples below is a better research question?

1. HAVE THERE BEEN SCHOOL SHOOTINGS IN THE U.S.?
2. WHAT PRACTICAL POLICIES CAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IMPLEMENT TO PREVENT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS?

Question 1 can be answered with a yes or a no, the answer is obvious, and it is not a topic about which reasonable people disagree. Question two, in contrast, is the better research question because it narrows the general topic of school violence to a specific focus on policies that might prevent shootings in public schools.

CONCLUSION

We're approaching the end of Part 1 of Research 101, so let's review what we learned today.

- Remember to analyze your assignment, making sure you understand and respond to its various requirements.
- Spend some time generating topic ideas. Pick something you are interested in, as you will be spending a lot of time with it! If you can't think of anything, consider using library resources, such as the CQ Researcher, to help you select an interesting topic.
- After picking a general topic, refine your topic. Make sure you've narrowed it down to a manageable focus.
- Finally, formulate a research question. Turn your specific topic into a question that provides you with a clear direction for your research efforts.