



## Choosing a Research Topic

One of the most difficult things about doing research is finding a good topic. Finding an area of interest is usually no problem, but discovering a specific topic within that area can be challenging or even frustrating. The following discussion should help you to select an appropriate research topic.

### ***Beginning***

If your professor allows you the option, begin with a subject that is of interest to you. For example, if you are a business major, choose an area of business about which you would like to learn more. If you are restricted to a specific area, say for example "Mental Health," you might want to do some background reading on the subject in order to have more ideas for identifying an appropriate topic.

Once you have selected (or are given) a subject for your project, look for ways to sufficiently narrow the subject to a manageable topic. If, for example, you are limiting yourself to a couple of months for researching and writing the paper and you also need to restrict the length of the paper to a fixed number of pages, you will want a topic that can be covered in depth within those constraints. The above example, "Mental Health," is much too broad to cover in anything shorter than a book. Your task, then, will be to discover some narrower aspect of this subject that you can develop effectively and completely in a project of limited scope.

### ***Discovery Tools and Multidisciplinary Databases***

One excellent way to quickly find good topics within a subject is to scan an article database to find out what other writers are currently concerned with. Many libraries now have so-called "discovery tools" that will let you search across a large number of research databases all at once. The UNF Library uses the EBSCO Discovery Service and has "branded" it *OneSearch*. You can do a search on a general topic in *OneSearch*, peruse some of the more recent articles, and likely get a feel for what people are writing about currently and possibly generate ideas for a more specific focus for your own research.

Even if a discovery tool is not available, most libraries will have multidisciplinary databases that cover a variety of subjects and make good starting points for identifying current topics. Examples of multidisciplinary databases include *Academic OneFile*, *ProQuest Central*, and *Academic Search Complete*. In addition to covering popular general interest periodicals such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, databases such as these also cover specialized publications such as *Current Health 2* and *Health*. A quick search of *Academic OneFile*, for example, for the subject "mental health" will reveal recent popular magazine articles and academic journal articles coming from a variety of publications. Limiting the search to just the past year will reduce the number of retrieved results even further. This is still way too broad a search even limited to the current year, so further refinements will need to be made, but this will give you a starting place for browsing what currently interests other researchers.

### ***An Example***

One of the articles that turned up in a search of *Academic Onefile* examines the role of outreach in delivering services to high-risk youth ("Intensive Outreach in Youth Mental Health: Description of a

Service Model for Young People Who Are Difficult-to-Engage and 'High-Risk'"). The title of the article suggests a couple of additional strategies for narrowing to a more focused topic. For example, the search could be adjusted to focus on mental health services for high-risk youth or mental health services for youth in general. A revised search on the subject "mental health services" and the keyword "youth" will result in a much more focused approach to the published literature than the initial search for mental health by itself. The number of articles retrieved in such a search might still produce more information than needed, but a quick scan of a few of the articles will likely provide you with additional ideas for further narrowing the search.

### ***Specific Databases***

Beyond the multidisciplinary databases, you could also look at searching one or more subject databases for more specific coverage relevant to your particular discipline. For example, the above mentioned topic might easily be covered in *PsycInfo*, the major research database for psychology, *PsycARTICLES*, a full text database covering key journals in psychology, or even *ERIC*, the publicly funded educational research database. While each database has its own individual features and vocabulary, they all have enough similarities to make searching them fairly straightforward. You might also consider scanning the list of journals covered in any of the specialized subject databases to get a better feel for discipline-specific journals that you could browse for ideas.

### ***Develop a Vocabulary***

If scanning article databases doesn't help, you might need to clarify your understanding of the subject first and acquire a working vocabulary to use in your search. A good way to do this is to search the library's Reference Collection for a specialized handbook, dictionary, or encyclopedia for the subject. For example, a basic reference for mental health commonly housed in a library's Reference Collection is *The Family Mental Health Encyclopedia*. Arranged alphabetically by topic and personal name, this reference work provides working definitions of mental health concepts and biographical information on important people in the history of the field. Scanning the content of this book might lead you to any number of interesting topics that you can then further investigate. Once armed with terminology relevant to the field, you can return to the article databases to find which of these topics are currently being researched and written about.

Many libraries will also have online encyclopedias and handbooks that will help you become acquainted with a working vocabulary for your topic fairly quickly. Sources such as *Credo Reference* and the *Gale Virtual Library* provide online access to numerous reference works that can be helpful in your search for topic ideas.

### ***Scanning Current Magazines and Journals***

Another good way to discover good research topics is to identify a couple of periodicals that publish information on your field of interest and scan current issues to get a feel for what people are writing about. If you don't know which periodicals to look in, check a guide to periodicals such as *Magazines for Libraries* (housed in most library Reference Collections) for names of relevant publications. The *Ulrich's* database is another good source for finding out what periodicals are published in a specific discipline. If none of these approaches leads you to a research topic, you might want to ask your professor for suggestions or ask a Reference Librarian for other suggestions for where to look.

## ***The Best Topics***

Generally speaking, the best choices for research topics have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Currency (the topic is currently being discussed widely by professionals in the field)
- Controversy or dispute (the topic lends itself easily to debate or can be argued from a pro and con perspective)
- Verifiability (the topic doesn't fall into the realm of the supernatural or involve unverifiable reports of difficult to document occurrences)
- Focus (the topic is neither too broad to be manageable nor too narrow to be successful)

It should become apparent early in your efforts to locate materials if you have chosen your topic well. If you are finding just enough material to make your points, you have probably chosen well. If you are finding too much material, you probably need to focus more. If you are not finding enough material, you probably need to re-examine your topic to determine if it is too narrow or if there is just not much information to be found on the topic.

Once you have identified a topic, examine it closely and ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this topic have explorable issues?
- What are they? What questions still need to be answered about this topic?
- Is there sufficient literary warrant to justify further researching this topic?

If you find it easy to answer these questions, most likely you have a potentially successful topic.

In any case, consult with your professor to make sure that you have selected a viable focus for your research and for additional help with your topic ideas.

*Reading by Jim Alderman. Updated March 2014.*