Let’s Talk Topics: A quick guide to topic formulation, development and refinement

1. RESEARCH IS A PROCESS

The act of researching and piecing together relevant information is not only an increasingly important skill in today’s data-driven world, but a process that is varied and individual to YOU. Because research is a process, you should be prepared for your topic/claim/argument/research questions to mutate and change slightly as you encounter background information and scholarly research. As Ballenger discusses in *The Curious Researcher*, “academic inquiry begins with questions, not answers. Because genuine inquiry can be sustained over time, it is essential that researchers suspend judgment...You do research not because you know what you think already but because you want to discover what you think” (p.9).

2. CHOOSING A GOOD RESEARCH TOPIC

This is your first challenge. It is very important to pick a topic that interests you. If that is not possible, try finding an angle or approach that speaks to you. Ask yourself: *What have I experienced that raises questions that research can help answer?*

If you are having trouble finding a topic, consider these other ways to find a topic: build upon assigned class readings/discussions, browse current events/news, search a research database, or browse Wikipedia. Be sure to consult the assignment guidelines or ask your professor/librarian if you feel you need more guidance.

3. WHAT MAKES A RESEARCH QUESTION/CLAIM “RESEARCHABLE”

- It is not too big or too small in scope.
- It focuses on some aspect of a topic about which something has been said.
- It interests the researcher.
- Someone has a stake in the answer.
- It implies an approach for answering it.
- It raises more questions.

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4. **DEVELOPING A WORKING KNOWLEDGE AND SEARCH STRATEGY**

Once you’ve settled on a topic, gathering some background information or a “working knowledge” will help further shape your research claim and also inform your search strategy. Work from more general information, such as what might be found in a quick Google search or encyclopedia, to more specialized information, such as an article from a library database. A working knowledge will help you focus your topic by uncovering different facets to explore as well as related concepts.

A sound search strategy will help you accomplish three things:

1. Finding *enough* information to fully explore a well-focused topic
2. Finding a *variety* of sources
3. Finding *quality* information

5. **REFINING YOUR SEARCH**

Are you overwhelmed with all the information you’ve uncovered for your proposed topic? Consider using one of the following elements to **NARROW** your search:

- Theoretical approach
- Aspect or sub-area
- Time
- Population group
- Geographical location

Conversely, you may be having trouble locating information about your proposed topic. Here are some ways to **BROADEN** your search in order to find more relevant information.

- Generalize
- Make sure your topic isn’t too new. Include newspaper databases to search media coverage of recent phenomenon.
- Use related concepts and key words.
- Limit use of common words and jargon.
- Check out the references/bibliography of any research already found.
6. **Key Words and Search Terms**

By now, you should have a good idea of the key concepts of your topic. It is a good idea to have a selection of search terms to enter in various combinations using Boolean Operators (AND, NOT, OR).

- AND is used to link concepts/key words, thereby narrowing your search results
- NOT is used to exclude a concept, such as homeless AND Washington NOT D.C.
- OR is used expand your search and find synonyms/related terms

Remember to also use synonyms for your key words, if they exist. For example, if you are researching global warming, you might also want to use “global climate change” as an alternate keyword. No one search query is perfect, so be flexible and willing to plug in different terms as a way to fully explore a topic.

7. **A Word About Research Synthesis**

When writing academically, most of your research papers will require you to synthesize, or piece together, your research in a meaningful and new way. This can be one of the more challenging aspects of writing for an academic audience. Research synthesis produces writing that is organized so that others can understand the sources. If you have achieved synthesis in your paper, your comprehension of your external sources, specific data and themes is readily apparent; the information you have found is combined with your question/thesis in such a way as to help your reader see the research you did, as well as your topic in a new light. The best method in achieving synthesis in your writing is to be organized and thorough.

Key features of synthesis writing:

- It accurately reports information from the sources using different phrases and sentences.
- It is organized in such a way that readers can immediately see where the information from the sources overlap.
- It makes sense of the sources and helps the reader understand them in greater depth.