FORMULATING
RESEARCH QUESTIONS
TOPIC IDEAS

Most of the time, you’ll be given a topic to write about. Other times, you’ll need to come up with your own idea, which can be the most challenging part of the research process. You can find ideas for topics in a number of places. Here’s a list to help you get started:

- **Textbooks** - Great for an overview of topics. If you are taking an interesting course, look in your textbook for topic ideas, or ask your professor.

- **Reference books** - Browse the reference area and look for encyclopedias or other reference sources that will give you background on a variety of topics. Also a good way to identify specific areas of the subject you might be interested in pursuing.

- **Magazines and newspapers** - Periodicals are good sources for exploring current events issues.

- **Journals** - These are best for exploring more scholarly topics. Ask a librarian for recommendations.

- **General or subject specific article database** - Great if you already have a topic in mind. *Academic Search Premier* is a good general database to start with if you aren’t sure where to look.

- **CQ Researcher** - For argumentative papers. Presents both sides of the story for controversial topics.

- **Google** - Use *Google* to help you narrow down a topic if you already have a general idea of what you want to research.

This video provides a brief introduction to formulating a college-level research question: [http://library.weber.edu/il/libs1704/textbook/videos/ResearchQuestion.html](http://library.weber.edu/il/libs1704/textbook/videos/ResearchQuestion.html)
FOCUSING THE TOPIC/FORMULATING A RESEARCH QUESTION

After you come up with an idea, you need to decide on what aspects of that idea you will emphasize. You can focus a topic by geography (Utah schools), a specific population (elementary school students), or to a particular time period (civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s). You don’t have to focus your topic in all these ways; these are just some possibilities.

Why is it important to focus a topic? If it’s too broad, you’ll be overwhelmed. For example, searching for sources on “education” would bring up an enormous amount of information, but focusing your search on “how school vouchers will hurt already economically strapped public schools” will provide a more manageable set of results. On the other hand, it is important that your topic is not too narrow, as you will have a hard time finding enough information (or the required type of information), and not have enough issues to develop effectively. In this situation, your paper may lack context and depth.

Following are some common mistakes people make when formulating research questions, and tips for fixing them:

**PROBLEM: Topic is too narrow. You will have a hard time finding sources on this topic.**

How will an increase in the number of charter schools in Ogden impact the local public schools in the area?

This is actually a great question, but you will have a hard time finding information on this topic, and may only find information in a few local newspapers or on the Web. If your paper requires you to use particular formats, such as scholarly journals, you’ll need to think a little more broadly.

**SOLUTION: Rewrite it so that it’s broad enough to include scholarly information.**

How does an increase in the number of charter schools in small towns impact the local schools in the area?

You’ll have a much easier time finding information on this broader topic, as there will be more coverage in a wider range of sources. You are no longer limiting yourself to Ogden, Utah, or to a particular type of school.

**PROBLEM: This topic is too current.**

One example might be trying to research the most recent presidential election just a month or two after it happened. In this case you will most likely not be able to find either books or scholarly journal articles on this topic because it’s so recent that none of these materials have been published yet.

**SOLUTION: Try a related topic that has a greater timespan.**

Rather than focusing on the most recent presidential debate, you might focus on a related issue, such as campaign financing or the merits of the electoral college.
**PROBLEM:** Topic can be answered with an encyclopedia or dictionary.

- *What is evolution?*

  This question involves no research or creative thought.

**SOLUTION:** Reword topic to require research and creative thought.

- *Why should evolution be taught in school?*

  Here you are clearly taking a side on this issue, and your research will provide reasons why it should be taught. You would use appropriate literature to provide support for your position.

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**PROBLEM:** These questions are too broad or vague.

- *How does television influence viewers?*

  Readers might ask: “How does television influence what viewers? What do you mean by influence?”

- *How are people motivated?*

  This question is too broad. What people are you referring to? Colleagues, teenagers, athletes, the elderly? Motivated in what ways? It could be positive or negative reinforcement, it could be through team leadership, etc.

**SOLUTION:** Reword so that questions are focused and more defined.

- *How does viewing of cartoons on tv by children under 2 affect their cognitive development?*

  Here you’ve focused on a more specific group, young children, and you’ve also defined what you mean by influence.

- *How do teachers motivate students through positive reinforcement and how does this affect their academic performance?*

  This helps narrow the focus to teachers and positive reinforcement and allows for the results to be examined through their academic performance.
**PROBLEM:** Popular topics that require little in-depth research should be avoided.

Examples in this category might include the topics of hip-hop music or football.

*How would a zombie apocalypse cause mental breaks in humans?*

While this is a little unorthodox for a research question, it can still be made into a valid research topic.

**SOLUTION:** Come up with a focus that might be covered in scholarly literature.

For example, you might research the role social class plays in hip hop music, or the issue of recurrent concussions in college football players. These focus on issues that might be covered in academic journals or books.

*How would the psychological concept of abjection play a role in how human beings reacted to a zombie apocalypse?*

This narrows the focus of the question to abjection and the zombie apocalypse. Someone researching this question would need to look at the psychological literature on abjection as well as the literature on zombies.

**PROBLEM:** This question can be answered with a simple yes or no.

*Should evolution be taught in schools?*

This is a great pro/con topic on a controversial issue, but it is phrased as an opinion type question that can be answered with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

*Will education in prisons affect recidivism rates?*

This is a great question, but as worded, it is a simple yes or no question.

**SOLUTION:**Reword topic to elicit more than a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer.

*Why should evolution be taught in school?*

You are no longer asking a yes or no question; rather, you are taking a side on this issue, and your research will provide reasons why it should be taught. You could also take the opposite point of view.

*How might education in correctional facilities play a role in reducing recidivism?*

This question implies that education impacts recidivism rates.