

NARROWING A TOPIC AND DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Narrowing a Topic

You may not know right away what your research question is. Gather information on the broader topic to explore new possibilities and to help narrow your topic.

- **Choose an interesting topic.** If you're interested in your topic, chances are that others will be, too. Plus researching will be a lot more fun!
- **Gather background information.**
 - For a general overview, **reference sources** may be useful.
 - The database **OneSearch@IU** is also a good place to start narrowing your focus and finding resources (libraries.iub.edu/onsearch).
 - Ask yourself:
 - What subtopics relate to the broader topic?
 - What questions do these sources raise?
 - What do you find interesting about the topic?
- **Consider your audience.** Who would be interested in the issue?

Reference Sources

Reference sources are a great place to begin your research. They provide:

- a way to identify potential research topics.
- a starting point to gather information on your topic.
- an introduction to major works and key issues related to your topic.
- key authors in your area of research.

General Reference Sources

Dictionaries and encyclopedias provide general information about a variety of subjects. They also include definitions that may help you break down and better understand your topic. They are generally not cited, since they mainly give an overview of a topic.



From Topic to Research Question

After choosing a topic and gathering background information, add focus with a research question.

- **Explore questions.**
 - Ask open-ended "how" and "why" questions about your general topic.
 - Consider the "so what" of your topic. Why does this topic matter to you? Why should it matter to others?
 - Reflect on the questions you have considered. Identify one or two questions you find engaging and which could be explored further through research.
- **Determine and evaluate your research question.**
 - What aspect of the more general topic you will explore?
 - Is your research question clear?
 - Is your research question focused?
(Research questions must be specific enough to be well covered in the space available.)
 - Is your research question complex?
(Questions shouldn't have a simple yes/no answer and should require research and analysis.)
- **Hypothesize.** After you've come up with a question, consider the path your answer might take.
 - If you are making an argument, what will you say?
 - Why does your argument matter?
 - How might others challenge your argument?
 - What kind of sources will you need to support your argument?

Sample Research Questions

Clarity

Unclear: Why are social networking sites harmful?

Clear: How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook?

Focused

Unfocused: What is the effect on the environment from global warming?

Focused: How is glacial melting affecting penguins in Antarctica?

Simple vs. Complex

Too simple: How are doctors addressing diabetes in the U.S.?

Appropriately complex: What are common traits of those suffering from diabetes in America, and how can these commonalities be used to aid the medical community in prevention of the disease?