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

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<tr>
<th>Clarity</th>
<th>Focused</th>
<th>Simple vs. Complex</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unclear:</strong> Why are social networking sites harmful?</td>
<td><strong>Unfocused:</strong> What is the effect on the environment from global warming?</td>
<td><strong>Too simple:</strong> How are doctors addressing diabetes in the U.S.?</td>
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<td><strong>Clear:</strong> How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook?</td>
<td><strong>Focused:</strong> How is glacial melting affecting penguins in Antarctica?</td>
<td>** 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?</td>
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