

Define your Topic and Develop your Research Question

Step 1: Define your Topic

Before you begin your research, you need to spend some time thinking about and planning your topic. This will save you a LOT of time once you begin researching and writing your paper.

1. What topic are you researching?

2. What do you know about this topic?

a. **What?** What is your topic about? Provide a 2-3 sentence explanation:

b. **Where?** Does this topic fit into a local, regional, or global scheme? Is there a particular physical environment for this topic?

c. **When?** Is there a certain time frame when this topic became important or experienced change? Do you want to research the current or historical view of this topic?

d. **Who?** Specific names or groups of people involved; consider gender, ethnicity, age groups, occupations, etc. Who does this topic affect?

e. **Why?** Why is this topic important? Why are you interested in researching this topic?

f. **How?** How do aspects of this topic affect one another? How does this topic affect you and others? If this topic involves a process, how do aspects of this topic function?

3. What would you like to find out about this topic? What questions do you have?

4. List primary keywords or phrases that may help you find more information on your topic. These keywords are the words you will use when you search in the databases for books and articles.

Step 2: Develop your Research Problem and Question

Developing a strong research question is essential. It will guide you all the way through your research and writing process. This process is designed to help you turn your defined topic into a well-crafted research problem and question.

Part 1: fill in the blanks to develop your research problem / statement

1. I am learning about (or studying/working on)
2. because I want to find out (who/what/where/when/whether/how/why)
3. in order to understand (how/why/what/whether)

Example of completed research problem or statement:

I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination in his early speeches because I want to find out how his belief in destiny and God's will influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War, in order to help my reader understand how his religious beliefs have influenced his military decisions.

Part 2: What question do you need to answer to solve the above problem?

Example research question from this problem:

Did Lincoln's belief in destiny and God's will influence his military decisions?

Adapted from The Research Toolkit Define Topic Worksheet by Celita DeArmond, San Antonio College and W. C. Booth, G. G. Colomb, & J. M. Williams (1995). *The craft of research*. University of Chicago Press

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