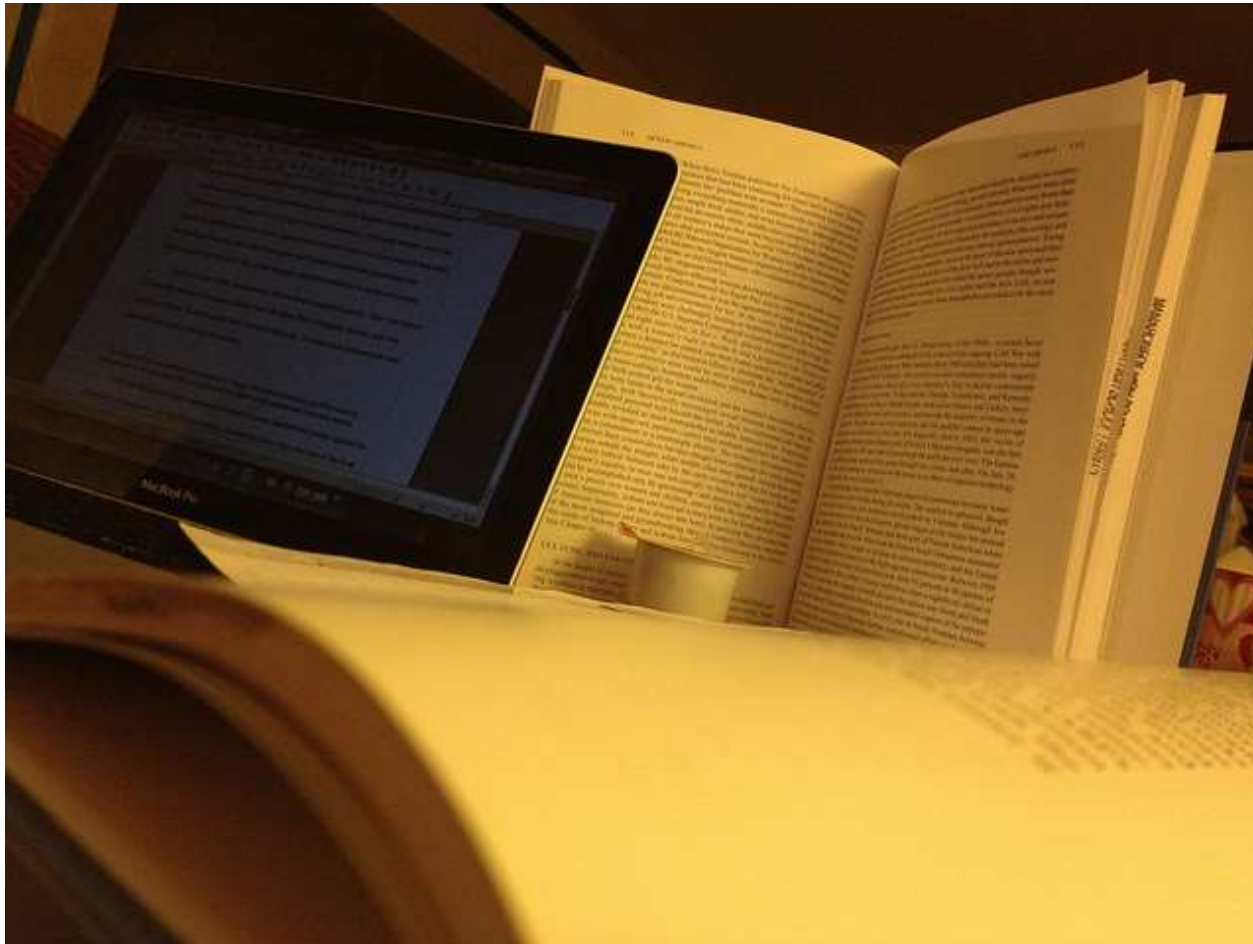


Choosing a Research Topic



A successful research project starts with a good topic. But how can you decide what to pick?



The first thing to do is **read your assignment carefully**. How long does it have to be? How many sources will you need? Are any topics off-limits?

Although you may do some summaries or reviews, most college-level research is **persuasive or argumentative** writing.

This type of research has a clear purpose:
**taking a stance and supporting it with
high-quality evidence.**

Choosing a good research topic has two main steps:

Step #1: Select a broad topic of interest.

Step #2: Narrow it down to an effective research topic once you have learned a little more.

There are many places that can help you find a broad topic idea, including news sources, magazines, course materials, or even a conversation with friends, family or your instructor.



The New York Times

But there are also a few **library databases** that are ideal for exploring an area of interest, and they also allow you to get a jump-start on your research at the same time. (Find them in a class LibGuide or the A-Z Databases List.)

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS
IN CONTEXT



CQ RESEARCHER
In-depth reports on today's issues



CREDO *reference*
Smart Research Starts Here

These databases allow you to browse or search for topics and read **background information**, **reference sources** (like online encyclopedias), **news**, **journal articles** and more.

In the News



Gay Marriage



Media Bias



Funding for the Arts

YOUR 'TOP 10' PRO vs. CON LEADING ISSUES



Gun control



Bullying



Marijuana,
Law and
legislation



Capital
punishment



Animal
experimentation



Firearms,
Law and
legislation



Same-sex
marriage



Abortion



Animal
welfare



Distracted
driving

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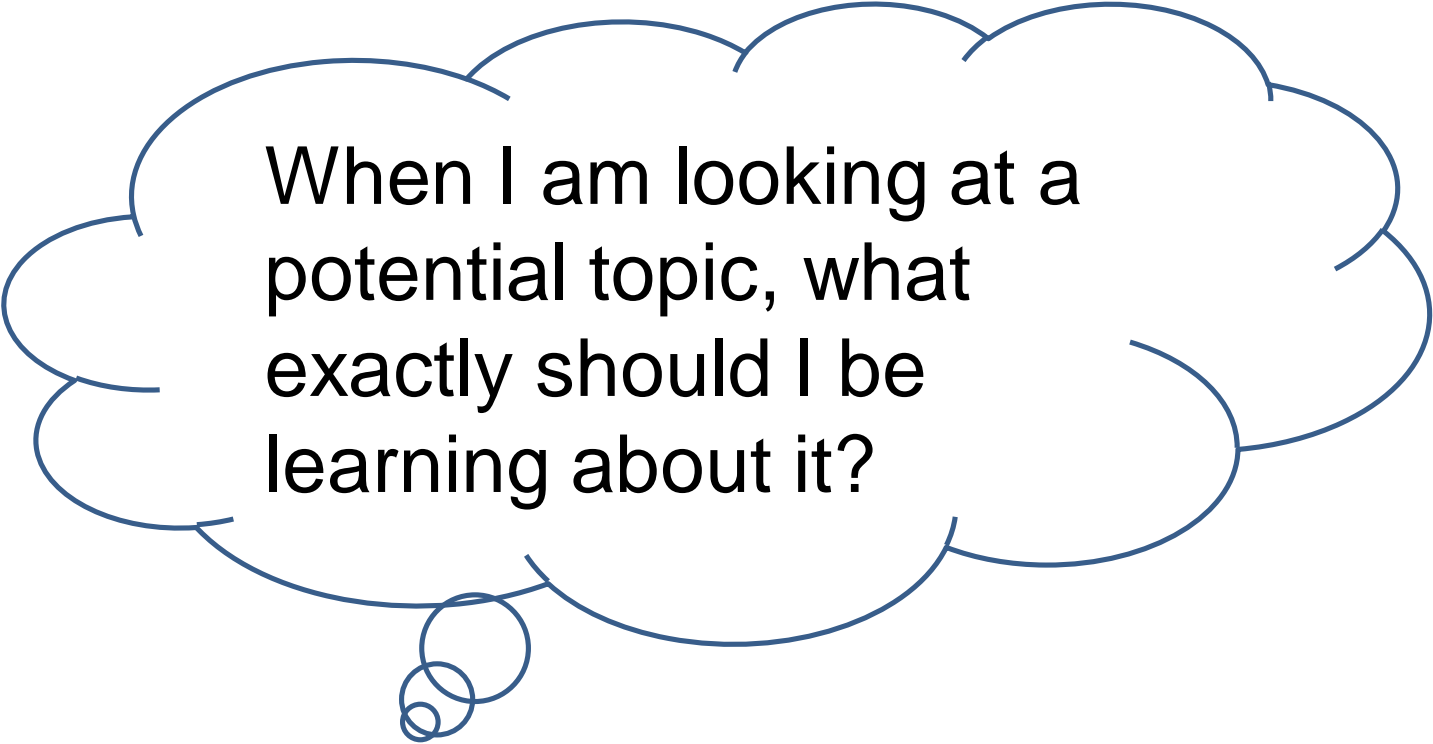
[The Wealthy Should Pay Taxes at a Higher Rate](#)

💡 *Are America's Wealthy Too Powerful?*, 2011

[Raising Taxes on the Wealthy Is Bad for the Economy](#)

💡 *Are America's Wealthy Too Powerful?*, 2011

These databases present different sides of complex issues. This helps with a very important part of doing good research: being open to what you find. You will not learn much if you only look for sources that validate preexisting beliefs. You **do** learn when you are open to new ideas and new knowledge.



When I am looking at a potential topic, what exactly should I be learning about it?

As you browse these databases, ask yourself five questions.

Questions to Ask When Browsing

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

Why?

Questions to Ask When Browsing

- Who?** Which groups have an interest in this topic? (ex. *parents, particular organizations, students, the government, etc.*) Who specifically will you focus on?
- What?** What are the most important issues at stake? What are the different factors involved?
- Where?** Where is the topic relevant? Will you focus on the United States? Ohio? Some sort of comparison?
- When?** When did the situation or event start? Is it ongoing? How recent should your sources be to be useful?
- Why?** What interests you about it? Why do you want to write about it?

As You Browse a Topic:

Once you can answer the **Who, What, When, Where** and **Why**, you typically will have a good idea of an effective, narrowed version of your original broad topic.

Your instructor might ask you to phrase your narrowed topic as a question; this is called the **research question**.

Good Research Questions Are

- 1) Answerable
- 2) Narrow enough to be covered sufficiently in the required number of pages
- 3) Broad enough that you can actually find information
- 4) Abstract enough to require analysis



Bad Research Questions Are

- 1) Trivia questions
- 2) Answered with a quick Yes or No
- 3) Answerable with a 5-minute search on Google
- 4) Asking for an opinion that cannot be supported



Are These Good Research Questions?

Where did the Civil War start?

Why did the Civil War start?

Who had the best-looking uniforms in the Civil War?

Are These Good Research Questions?

Where did the Civil War start?

No. It can be answered with a quick Google search and has a definite answer. It is not an interesting question.

Why did the Civil War start?

No. It is way too broad to be covered well in a college paper. Entire books have been written on this subject, and even they cannot fully answer it.

Who had the best-looking uniforms in the Civil War?

No. It is a matter of opinion. If I like the color blue there is no evidence that can convince me that gray is more attractive.

Fixing Bad Research Questions

| Bad | Better |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Why did the Civil War start? | How did the Mexican-American War lead to the subsequent Civil War? |
| Who had the best-looking uniforms during the Civil War? | Which army's uniforms were better suited for fighting in the Civil War? |

You do not want a topic that is so broad you cannot make an effective argument, but you also do not want one too narrow that you cannot find any published information.

Let's take a look at some more examples.

| Too Broad | Just Right | Too Narrow |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reality TV | Reality TV shows and portrayal of African-American women | Arguments about race in the show Big Brother in 2013 |
| Bullying | Successful bullying prevention programs in elementary schools | Consequences and prevention of bullying in elementary schools in Montgomery County |
| Campus safety | Benefits and costs of implementing after-hours campus safety program | Number of muggings prevented by installing new sidewalk lights on campus |

Another important thing to ask is whether your research topic is approachable from at least two sides. In other words, someone else should be able to take another view.

Fixing Bad Research Questions

What does the president do?

What power does the president have over declaring war?

Although the second research question is more specific, neither of these examples is approachable from two sides. The paper would simply be a summary of indisputable facts and no one could reasonably take another view.

Fixing Bad Research Questions

Should the president have the power to declare war?

Now our research question is debatable and we can choose the position that is best supported by evidence. The paper will certainly include some description of the president's powers, since this is necessary for the reader to understand, but this research question goes deeper and requires analysis. It will end up being much better research!

These are all general guidelines. Be sure to look carefully at your assignment and talk to your instructor about choosing a good research topic in the context of your class.

Next Steps: Look over the resources in the “further activities” section to the right and take the Quiz below it.

Also, please leave any comments or questions you have below this presentation.

Credits

Images

Slide 1 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/rememberremix/8394083030/>

Slide 2 <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ludwg/8668129713/>

Slides 14-15 <http://www.psdgraphics.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/thumbs-up-down-icons.jpg>

Content

Slides 16-20 adapted from University of West Georgia's "The Research Process" handout

Slide 20 chart adapted from Kansas State's "COMM 105/106: Public Speaking" LibGuide <http://guides.lib.k-state.edu/publicspeaking105/106>

Key Takeaway: A great way to choose an effective research topic is to start with a broad area of interest, browse library databases to answer the “Who/What/When/Where/Why,” and then formulate a research question that takes a stance on your issue and can be supported with high-quality evidence.