

# Doing a Research Project

# Picking a Topic

It's a big project, so pick something you care about and want to be "yours," such as:

- An old cause of yours;
- A cause you would like to deal with as a lawyer; or
- Something you puzzle over and can't explain.

# Got an Idea? Check It Out

- 1) Is it feasible?
- 2) Is it just another “dead horse?”
- 3) Is it more than an encyclopedia entry?

## 1) Is it feasible?

- Is it feasible for you to do it now, here, with the time and resources you have?
- Are the necessary data available around here? Is they available to you?
- Are there people who will talk to you near here?
- Is it small enough for you to do a thorough job this semester with all your other courses?

2) Is it just another “dead horse?”

- Do you have a chance to say something new and interesting, or has this been done and done? If it’s “popular,” do you have a new take on it? Check out what others have researched and said. Cut yourself a new piece.

3) Is it more than an encyclopedia entry?

- A scholarly research project is not just the who, what, when, where of an encyclopedia article. **It's about why and how. Cause and effect!**

# Put It Together Before You Start

- 1) Draft an “If-then” statement ...
- 2) Make sure you are able to and do define your terms.
- 3) Summarize what happened / what you are studying in “25 words or less.”
- 4) How do you think your ideas and research relate to others’ theories about this or comparable events or cases?

# The Data Dilemmas

What kinds of data should you collect or use?

# Data, Data, and More Data

# Documents

- Secondary sources – a journalist's or scholar's – on what happened and why.
- Primary sources – players' memoirs, statistical data, legal briefs, government officials' reports.
- Always remember, just because it is in print does not make it true. You have to judge these sources – can you believe their versions of events, or are you reading what they defined their own way? Or, is this data useful as a way to show the sides' positions?

# Interviews

- Asking the players what they did and what they thought is important for most people's research on contemporary topics.
- To do it, you need to be clear who the players are.
- You need to ask your questions in their language.
- You need to formulate the questions so that you get answers relevant to your issue.
- **But**, you need say them in such a way that the interviewee does not know your bias.

# Surveys

- Ask a lot of people the same or similar questions. Most surveys are about:
  - Who they are.
  - What they did.
  - What they thought.

# Open-Ended Surveys

- Ask general questions, and let the subjects tell their own stories or give their opinions in their own words.
- You have to make sure the questions are understandable and answerable for your subjects.
- You probably have to do this by going out and meeting with them. Few people will take the time to write you long answers.
- These are hard to “collate” and make use of the data other than by quoting the juicy parts.

# Closed-Ended Surveys

- Not only are there questions, but the answers are pre-stated.
- For questions of opinion about who people are and what they have done.
- Before you ask the questions, try them out. Are they understandable; and do your answers cover all the possible options without pre-judging by their wording or their order?
- These are easy to compare, but you have to be sure they reflect people's answers and are not leading or just your answers.

# Participant Observation

- Being part of the story, hanging around and watching what happens.
- Thermometer effect (problem for all research but worst for participant observers): Once you put yourself and your questions in place, people see things and act differently.
- Make sure you are sensitive to what happens, where, and how it looks. Think carefully about what all this means.

# Games and Simulations

- Creating a laboratory and making things happen.
- Pretty unreal but good ways to put things in stark relief.



# Research Cautions

# Human Subjects Approval

Institutional Board that decides if your research is “safe” for your subjects. Get the approval before you start.

# Thermometer Effect . . .

- “If someone cares, this must be important.”
- “He asked, therefore it is...”

Promises to Sources:  
Watch what you  
promise! What you say  
is what you do!

- Write a clear statement to present your research to your sources – tell them what may or may not happen as a result.
- Decide whether you will need to promise your sources anonymity.
- If you promise them anonymity, **Do not** violate your promise.
- Plan ahead about how you are going to protect your sources and still make your research credible.

# Putting It All Together and Getting An Answer

- Take a breath and the time to think about what you have found out.
- Review your initial hypothesis: Is it right or wrong? Do you have better explanation after all your research? Or, did you find something more interesting that you can document?

## Step II: Putting It Together

- Introduction: Lay out the basics of the case/events you studied and your hypothesis. Be clear about why all this is important!
- Literature Review: What have others said about this or comparable cases and how are your conclusions different and better?

## Step III: The Body

- Then (or in an appendix), tell what your data base is and how you did your research so it is valid and reliable.
- Make your case:
  - Define your terms
  - Tell what you found about X and Y and how the cause and effect work. **BUILD WITH YOUR DATA, DON'T JUST CONTEND!**
  - (As you do it, think of the other explanations and make sure that your data disproves them but don't go off on discussing them ... Stay focused, just cover the objections.)

## Step IV: The End

- Summarize your hypothesis and conclusion.
- Remind the reader why all this is important in the Big World and what it says about events beyond your own research focus. Where can it be applied?

# WARNING

- Make sure you have documented all your data with footnotes.
- Don't forget to do a full bibliography.