



Developing a Research Topic

This information can get you started as you develop a research question. However, it will still help to get feedback on your topic and question as you develop it, so run your idea by your professor, the writing partners at The HUB, and librarians.

Narrowing your topic

It may seem counterintuitive to narrow your research topic, but doing so will help your project be more manageable and will give you more direction so the research process is less overwhelming.

So what steps can you take to start to develop a narrow topic? Try these:

1. **Choose a topic that interests you** – You’ll be spending a lot of time with your topic, so it’s best to choose something that intrigues you. If you feel stuck, talk to your professor. Your professor wants you to be invested in the assignment, so brainstorming some ideas ahead of time with your professor can help you to choose a topic that you want to research.
2. **Find background information** – Locate sources that give you background or foundational information about your topic. You might not end up referencing these sources in your final project, but you can find out more about the topic, what questions other researchers have asked, what controversies are debated in the field, and what subtopics branch out from your initial topic idea.
3. **Think about your purpose for writing** – What is the assignment asking you to do? What type of information are you being asked to find, and what do you need to do with it? Are you developing your own argument? Explaining what others have uncovered about a topic? Make certain you’re clear about your purpose because that will help to inform your understanding of the sources you find.

Structuring your topic

Once you’ve done some initial thinking and researching about your topic, start to refine and specify your question. And, yes, your topic should be a question! Don’t just have your topic be “Drought in California”. That’s way too broad and doesn’t give a lot of direction.

Develop questions that are **open-ended and that encourage analysis**. Starting your question with “how” or “why” can help.



Be certain that your question **matters**. That means the topic should matter to you and others. It needs to have a “so what?” element to it. You can list reasons why the question is important, why people should be interested, why it’s timely, etc.

What are some sample questions?

The exact type of question you ask and the research you do depends a lot on what the assignment is asking you to do, so (again) make certain the assignment criteria are clear. If you’re uncertain about those, or if you’re uncertain about what the final product should look like, check with your professor.

The following examples can help you to consider questions that are more or less effective based on key characteristics of **focus**, **clarity**, and **complexity**:

Focus

Focused question: How have current drought conditions in California impacted political arguments across the state?

Unfocused question: What is the drought doing to California?

Clarity

Clear: Why should high schools limit the types of advertising students see during athletic events?

Unclear: Are advertisements problematic?

Complexity

Effective level of complexity: What are common issues related to food insecurity in County X, and how can the university help to address those issues?

Ineffective level of complexity: How is food insecurity a problem?

