ProQuest Research Companion

Where do I start?

# Feeling overwhelmed?

When you're assigned a research paper, you may feel overwhelmed and like you don't know where to start.

If so, then guess what? You're not alone.

A 2013 study by the Project Information Literacy group found that 8 out of every 10 students reported experiencing "overwhelming difficulties" when starting a research assignment and figuring out what their instructors wanted.\* There’s little evidence things have improved since the study was published and, with the proliferation of concerns about *fake news*, there are grounds for believing students now feel even more overwhelmed.

We'll do what we can to reduce the anxiety you may feel when your instructor tells you to write a research paper. But first, we're going to let you in on a little secret:

Research is hard. And writing is hard.

Consequently, there'll be times in the research and writing process when you get stuck and feel unsure about what to do next.

That's normal. It doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. It means research and writing are hard. And they take time. And usually involve multiple false starts and a fair amount of frustration.

One of the worst mistakes you can make as a researcher is assuming that because something is hard, you must be doing something wrong. If anything, the opposite is true: feeling challenged is an indication you're on the right track.

# Ten Basic Terms

Let's give you some quick definitions of 10 terms you're likely to encounter during the research process.

We'll start with the most basic one of all: ***research***. What's research?

It's looking for information on a topic that will help you prove a claim. What it's *not* is storytelling or personal reflections.

Here are some more.

***Claim***? The thing you're trying to prove, sometimes referred to as the "main claim."

***Thesis***? Another word for your main claim.

***Thesis statement***? A formal version, usually one or two sentences, of your thesis.

***Evidence***? Anything that could be used to support your thesis statement.

***Argument***? Basically, your claim plus your evidence.

***Data***? A specific kind of evidence, often in the form of facts or statistics.

Okay, we're down to our last three.

***Sources****?* Articles or other kinds of information that you consult or cite in your final project.

***Citing****?* This is what you do to avoid plagiarism and let your reader know where you found your sources.

And finally . . .

***Information literacy***? A set of competencies that involve finding, evaluating, and using information.

# Scholarly Arguments

One of our 10 basic terms was "argument." This is obviously a term that's used in normal, day-to-day conversation.

But scholarly arguments are different from regular arguments. They aren't just disagreements. They're not one person saying something and another person saying the opposite. Scholarly arguments are complex and generally focused on questions with many possible answers. What's important then is not that you "win" or "lose" a scholarly argument but that you make a persuasive case.

So how do you make a persuasive case? Well, you provide good enough evidence that a smart, reasonable, and skeptical reader will believe you're probably right. Finding information you can use as evidence is the objective of your research.

These days, the problem isn't finding *enough* information, it's finding *good* information. There are any number of sources you can look to for information. They include journals, magazines, newspapers, books, websites, blogs, podcasts, newsletters, diaries, videos, photographs, and social media. Not all of these sources will prove equally helpful, and some of them, like social media, will always have to be used very carefully. But they're all potential sources of evidence for you.

As we explore the various stages of the research process, we'll be focusing on argument-based papers, ones where you make a debatable claim and try to persuade people you're right. However, the basic principles we'll cover apply to other kinds of research projects, too, including purely informative papers and projects that don't result in a paper at all.

# Finding a topic you're curious about

**What's a "topic"?**

People use the term in different ways. In its most general sense, a topic refers to a subject area. It could be a controversy (like currency manipulation or racially insensitive team mascots), a problem (poverty or crime), or even a pastime or interest (video games or fashion). If you're thinking you could choose a topic from pretty much any subject area, you're right!

But that's not to say every topic would be right for *you*. The topic that's right for you depends on what *you're* curious about. Indeed, when choosing a topic, the most important question you can ask yourself is this one: "What makes me curious?"

But instead of asking themselves what makes them curious, many students start with other questions. Like "Which topic would be easiest to write about?"

The problem with asking a question like this so early in your research process is, quite simply, that you'll be in no position to answer it. Before you start a research project, you usually won't have any idea how hard it's going to be to write the paper. And you won't know how long it's going to take or what problems you're going to run into.

Actually, if you *did* already know all that, you wouldn't be writing a research paper, at least not the kind your instructor expects you to write. A "good" research paper, the kind your instructor expects, isn't an obvious research paper. It takes work. A good research paper *always* takes work. So you may as well pick a topic you're curious about.

A topic you're *curious* about is different from one you merely *like*. Being curious about something means wanting to learn more, *much* more, about it.

For example, you may *like* playing *Fortnite*. You may even like reading about it in video game magazines or on social media. But are you *curious*about it? Do you want to sift through peer-reviewed psychology journals looking for studies examining the correlation between video game use and violent behavior? Or do you want to read highly technical articles written by and for computer graphics designers? If not, then maybe you're not really *curious* about *Fortnite*.

Now, there isn't anything inherently wrong with topics related to *Fortnite*, or, for that matter, Candy Crush , meditation, vaping, ketogenic diets, or *Black Panther*. It's just that when you pick a topic, especially one related to popular culture, you've got to make sure there's something in your topic that you're genuinely interested in researching. If there isn't, then you'll likely end up with a boring paper, boring for you to research and boring for your instructor to read.

# The trouble with strong opinions

Here, it's worth pointing out that being curious about a topic doesn't necessarily mean you have a strong opinion about it. In fact, having a strong opinion sometimes gets in the way.

Why? Because if you think you already know "the answer," there’s a danger that you’ll assume all sources that support your opinion, including various kinds of fake news, are valid. You’ll also risk ignoring evidence that contradicts your opinion. In the worst case, you may find yourself incapable of even imagining what kind of evidence *could* contradict your opinion.

Take abortion, for example. Like animal rights, immigration policies, and the death penalty, it's a controversial issue that students tend to have strong opinions about.

If you are so passionate about abortion rights that you instinctively dismiss all anti-abortion arguments as the mindless prejudices of bigoted fanatics, you may struggle to understand, let alone recognize the validity of, legal critiques of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade*.

The point is not that you can't do effective research on a topic you feel strongly about but, rather, that feeling strongly about something isn't the same thing as being *curious* about it. As we've said, choosing a topic you're curious about is critical. Choosing a topic you feel passionately about isn't only *not* critical, but it can get in the way of good research. Because it can lead you to ignore evidence that goes against your position.

# Asking questions

We’re at a stage where, if you haven’t done so already, it may be useful to read a couple of simple overviews about the topics you’re considering. There are several reasons topic overviews can be useful.

One is they help you decide whether or not you’ve got something you’re going to want to spend a lot of time doing research on. Another is they alert you to related topics you may find more interesting. And still another, perhaps the most important of all, is they help you come up with questions.

What kinds of questions? Basically, we’re talking about ***research questions***, questions that will help you transform a general topic you’re curious about into a specific research topic you can write about. In practice, the most effective of these questions tend to be ones that can’t be answered with a simple yes or no.

Here’s why. If you ask a yes/no question like “Does making contraceptives easily available increase sexual activity among teens?” you’ll no doubt find an answer. But by narrowing the focus so early in the research process, you risk locking yourself into writing about a topic that’s less interesting than others you might discover by keeping an open mind for longer.

A more productive question may be “What are the effects of making contraceptives easily available to teenagers?” That question opens up the possibility you’ll find other effects, besides the effects on sexual activity, that you’d be more interested in exploring.

Whatever question you ask, getting an answer doesn’t mean you’re ready to start writing your paper. Or even that you’ve found a topic. For example, if you decide you really *do* want to explore the impact on teen sexual activity of making contraceptives easily available, you’ll likely read studies suggesting there isn’t much of an impact. But so what? That fact in and of itself doesn’t tell us very much. What it does is lead to more questions.

For a start, you’ll want to ask yourself what precisely the studies you looked at were measuring. And then you may want to ask if the conclusions were the same for everyone. Or did they vary by group? Did behavior vary based on teens’ sexual orientation or gender identity, for example? Or by their religious upbringing or ethnicity? If there are significant differences across groups, then understanding *why* those differences exist might be an interesting research topic.

Or maybe, after doing some preliminary research, you find what you’re *really* interested in understanding is why the rate of pregnancy, or even abortion, among teens in a particular group is so high (or low).

As you can see, once you get going, there are any number of questions you can ask. It’s now time for you to pick the ones you’re most interested in answering.

Well, almost.

# Tell Me More

#### “Quantification”

Another sign that you're asking good research questions is that they lend themselves to answers that are concrete, specific, and *measurable*.

Take a research question like "Are people nicer today than they were a hundred years ago?"

What kind of evidence would help you answer that question?

Well, first you'd need to define what you're going to consider as evidence of "niceness." Maybe you decide your evidence is going to be rates of opening doors for other people, and maybe you have a hunch that people open doors less often now than they used to. That's fine (and potentially an interesting topic).

But are changes in the rate of door opening really something you can measure? How many people would you have to observe now? And even if you could observe enough people to make your findings statistically significant, what are you going to compare them to? It seems pretty unlikely that a hundred years ago anyone bothered studying—and recording—how often people held open the door.

Maybe your great-grandparents tell you they remember what it was like when they were small children and that, unlike now, *everyone* held the door. But that's just their memory, and memories, as study after study has demonstrated, are notoriously unreliable.

The point is you may *think* people open the door for each other less now, and you may well be right. But rates of door opening are, for various reasons, difficult to quantify.

So what evidence of "niceness" *could* be quantified?

Charitable donations are a possibility. They're easy to measure, and records exist showing how much people gave to charities, both now and a hundred years ago.

Of course, it's not that simple. There are many objections you could make against equating "niceness" with charitable donations, and, if you're going to make a persuasive argument, you're going to have to counter the most serious ones. But that's for another day.

For now, it's enough that you have taken a vague and abstract concept like "niceness" and defined a clear and concrete way of measuring it. That's ***quantification***, and good research questions are often ones with answers that can be quantified.

# Finding a gap in the research

When formulating a research question, it's important to ask yourself whether or not it has already been answered. If pretty much everyone who has researched your question has answered it the same way, there's usually not a whole lot of value in your asking and answering it again. Why? Because writing a research paper is a bit like having a conversation.

If your friends are discussing the likelihood of a thunderstorm raining out their softball game, you wouldn't go up to them and say, "It could rain." Not because it isn't true but because they already know that. Your telling them it *could* rain doesn't give them any useful information.

It's the same with research. There's little point asking questions that will end up with you rehashing the same old answers. Your goal should be to find a gap in the research so that you can add something new or different to the conversation.

For example, there's no longer much debate about the fashion and advertising industries fueling anorexia among teenage girls. So asking if the fashion and advertising industries fuel anorexia among teenage girls is unlikely to lead you to an especially interesting research topic. On the other hand, much less is known about the causes of male anorexia or about the effects of social media on anorexia. If you tackled either of these, you'd likely have no trouble finding interesting research questions.

To be clear, you don't need to pick a research question that *no one* has written anything about. Indeed, such a topic would be impossible to research because you couldn't find relevant sources. The key is finding a question that hasn't been definitively answered, either because scholars disagree on what that answer is or because the answer is not supported by adequate research.

# Narrowing your topic

We have stressed the importance of finding something you want to do research on and not simply trying to guess what would be the easiest thing to write a paper about. Well, now it's time to buckle down and come up with a topic you can write about.

As we said at the outset, people use the word "topic" in different ways. In its most general sense, a topic can be something as broad as "abortion" or "gun control." But neither would make a good *research paper* topic. They're both way too general, and, as you've probably heard many times from your instructor, good research paper topics are always *specific*.

There are a number of things you can do to turn a broad topic into a specific one, the kind that you can do research on.

One classic method involves looking for cause-and-effect relationships. The key is to look for specific ones. So not something like "the effects of legislation on abortion rates" but, perhaps, "the impact of abstinence-only programs on unwanted pregnancies among students." And not "the impact of regulating gun ownership" but, say, "the degree to which the steady reduction in Australia's homicide rates in the late 1990s and early 2000s was a result of a 1996 gun-buyback program."

Another classic method for narrowing a topic is to argue for a particular course of action. You could take these examples and argue that state-funded abstinence-only programs should be scrapped until we have hard data proving their effectiveness or that the United States should attempt to curb gun violence by instituting a nationwide voluntary gun-buyback program.

One advantage of the "arguing for a particular course of action" method of narrowing topics is that it can be implemented even where cause-and-effect relationships are well established. So whereas the impact of the fashion industry on anorexia rates among teenage girls is very well understood, what, if anything, we should do about it isn't. One way into a topic like this would be to argue for a rating system for magazines and for a "restricted" rating for all fashion magazines. Would such restrictions reduce anorexia? Who knows? But, if it's a topic you're interested in, it could be worth exploring.

Returning to the abortion example, you might have started out wanting to write about abortion, just abortion, which is a terrible topic for a research paper. It's way too general and not something you could ever cover within a single research project. But by asking questions, you might end up researching something like "the psychological impact of unwanted pregnancies on women with a history of anorexia." You may have no interest in this particular topic, but it illustrates the kind of specificity you should strive for in a topic you're curious about.

# Marijuana legalization example

Okay, let's explore the principles involved in picking a good topic by looking at a subject that many students like writing about (though, we should point out, one that few instructors enjoy reading about): the legalization of marijuana.

As you can see, this is a topic only in the very general sense of the word, it's not something you could write a short research paper on. So right away, it would be worth asking yourself two questions. One, is there something about the legalization of marijuana I'm genuinely curious to learn more about? And, two, am I so passionately for or against legalization that I'd struggle to weigh all the evidence fairly?

If your answer to the first question is yes and your answer to the second is no, then it's reasonable to move on.

At this point, you may want to read a couple of short overviews on legalization issues. The main point of reading overviews is not to find evidence for your paper—in general, you won't end up referring to them in your paper-but, rather, to come up with questions you're interested in finding answers to.

An obvious question would be "What would be the effects of legalizing marijuana?" This isn't a horrible question, but its vagueness makes it difficult to research. You'll need something more specific.

"What are the health consequences of marijuana use on healthy adults?" is more specific. But it's still problematic. Because, despite what you may read in pro-legalization blogs, the scholarly literature on this subject is pretty clear: for healthy adults, any marginal health benefits of using marijuana are far outweighed by the health *costs*.

This doesn't mean you'll have to abandon the issue of marijuana legalization entirely. You'll just need to come up with specific questions to which the answers aren't already well-known. Maybe you're interested in the impact of legalization on incarceration rates, for example. If so, you could ask questions about the relationship between overcrowding in jails and mandatory custodial sentences for marijuana users.

It's in asking specific questions like this that you'll succeed in narrowing down your topic. Without asking questions, it's very difficult to take a broad subject area and carve out a topic you can effectively research and write about. There are no shortcuts.

# No easy topics

When it comes to choosing topics, it's worth emphasizing a simple point: that there really is no such thing as an "easy topic." With any research topic worthy of the name, you're going to end up sorting through complex and challenging data.

And that's *good*. If you're asking questions with difficult answers and you're reading articles that make you rethink your beliefs, then you're probably getting close to defining a good research topic.

If, on the other hand, you are still asking questions to which you know the answers and persist in looking for that *one article* which neatly expresses all of your opinions, then you probably have some way to go. A good research paper should consist of far more than a few strategically chosen quotes to "prove" what you think you already know.

Bottom line: it won't be easy, but if you pick something you're curious about and ask enough questions, you can find a focused topic that, maybe, just maybe, you'll actually enjoy researching!

# Checklist

* Make a list of things that interest you.
* Divide your list into a) topics you’re curious about and b) topics you simply like.
* Read one or two short overviews of the topics in List A.
* Based on what you find interesting in these overviews, create several research questions.
* When researching answers to these questions, create more specific and focused questions.
* As you research answers to those more specific questions, decide which of them you’re most interested in researching and writing about.