Chapter 3: Choosing and Focusing a Topic
Lynn Kanne

Learning Objectives:
- Select and define a workable research topic using appropriate information sources
- Use academic disciplines to determine where to find information on a topic
- Narrow or broaden a topic to fit the scope and requirements of an assignment

Introduction
The first step in any research project is selecting a topic. Sometimes instructors give specific topic assignments, but you often have the freedom to choose a topic that interests you. When this is the case, you need sources of ideas and you need to know what your assignment requires. Once you choose a topic, focusing it will help you decide what kinds of information you need.

Background information can help you understand important issues and aspects that you should consider. Finding background information will help you focus your topic so you will know how and where to search for more information. When you don't know where to start with a topic that is new to you, reference books can provide quick access to background information.

Pre-searching, or exploring the information available on a particular subject, also helps define a workable topic. Pre-searching helps determine whether your topic is researchable within time available. A bit of time spent pre-searching can help you avoid choosing and abandoning multiple topics for a single research assignment.

Finally, developing a research question will help you define your research goals. Consider the topic of intellectual freedom. While it might be daunting to research this broad topic, a more specific research question (such as How has recent legislation affected Americans’ access to ideas and information?) makes it much clearer just what you’re looking for. The question you develop will help you decide what kinds of information you need and where to look for it. As you proceed, you can use your topic question to separate important information from unimportant information.

This chapter is about how to select and focus a topic for a successful research experience and covers the first few steps of the research process described in Chapter 2.

Choosing a Topic

A good topic…

Meets the requirements and scope of the assignment
Consider how long the project will be, how much time you have, and what kind of information you are required to include. Your topic should fit the theme or subject of your class.

Interests you and your reader
Choose a topic both you and your reader—usually your instructor—will enjoy learning more about. Consider topics that are significant to you, your family, or your community, that have always
fascinated or bothered you, or perhaps that you need to know about for reasons beyond the class you're taking. Don't limit yourself to topics you've already researched or already know a lot about.

Can be researched

Choose topics that focus on issues and ideas for which some information already exists. Beware of topics that are so basic or self-evident (such as drug abuse is dangerous) that you might have a difficult time producing interesting opinions or analysis about them.

Getting Started

To begin, read your assignment carefully to make sure you understand what your instructor expects. If any part of the assignment is unclear, ask your instructor to explain. Next, write down any potential topics that seem interesting.

If you're having trouble generating ideas, use outside sources for inspiration. Here are some suggestions:

- Browse a few issues of your local newspaper
- Browse the reference shelves in the subject areas you're interested in; look for articles in subject oriented encyclopedias
- Go to a virtual library on the Web and browse the topic categories
- Talk to friends, family members, your instructor, or a librarian about topic ideas
- Browse an online database like Opposing Viewpoints or CQ Researcher. These databases are often listed with other research or reference databases.

Once you have a few ideas, begin to consider how you might approach them. One good way to get started is called mind mapping, a technique that helps get your ideas on paper. Visit the University of Massachusetts for a tutorial on how to use this simple technique. Write down all your thoughts about your topic without worrying about what you don't yet know. Review your notes and circle the most interesting ideas, problems, issues, or concepts that you wrote down.

If you know very little about your topic, the pre-search will help focus your topic further.

Pre-Searching

Pre-searching is a preliminary step to help you understand your topic well enough to begin to refine and focus it. It is also a "test drive" to help you decide whether and how to proceed with a topic you've chosen. Begin by using a general encyclopedia, such as Britannica Online, to learn a little more about your chosen topic. Make notes about anything you find intriguing, want more information about, or don't understand. Consider which broad subject categories your topic might fit into.

Academic Disciplines

To find more in-depth information about your topic, you'll need to look in the broad subject areas, or academic disciplines, that are most likely to focus on it. Knowing which academic disciplines might cover your topic will help you find reference materials and other books. Disciplines will also help you think about where to search for the best information.

Scholars from the different academic disciplines each use different research methods, terminology, and styles of communication. They may approach the same topic from very different perspectives.
If you pursue education in one of these disciplines, you will have to learn much about how research happens in that discipline. For beginning research, you need to be aware that methods and terminology vary depending on the discipline. Also consider which of these perspectives make the most sense for your research project.

The three major categories of disciplines are Science, Social Sciences, and Humanities. A forth category, interdisciplinary fields, includes fields of study that combine content, terminology, and methods from more than one academic discipline. Most colleges and universities use disciplines to categorize their course offerings. If you can major in it, it is probably a discipline.

Disciplines can help you:

- Understand where to look for information
- Narrow or broaden your topic
- Select an appropriate style and format for your paper, including citations

Visit the Washington State University Libraries tutorial for more details on academic disciplines. While you’re there, read about Discourse and Disciplines and then read about at least one of the three major disciplines. Hint: choose one that seems most relevant to your current research topic.

Consider the topic of Intellectual Freedom, a topic that definitely affects everyone. Writers in different disciplines – philosophers, political scientists, educators, psychologists, artists and others – might engage in research and reflection on this broad topic. But each would approach it from the perspective of a particular academic discipline or area of subject expertise. The political scientist might consider how policies that define intellectual freedom are developed and the public debate that surrounds them, while the educator might be more interested in the role of intellectual freedom in teaching and learning.

Now, consider which disciplines might be concerned with your topic. Using the list of disciplines in Table 3.1 at the end of this chapter, decide which disciplines are most relevant to your particular approach to your topic.

Using your understanding of the disciplines that might consider your topic, look for a subject encyclopedia with some information about your topic. Remember that very narrow or regional topics may not be listed in subject encyclopedias. If necessary, look for information on a related broader topic. Using an encyclopedia and following the format suggested below, learn a little about your topic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Search Worksheet (example)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic Idea</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Encyclopedia used</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What new things have you</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>learned about the topic?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic Focusing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some people are concerned about privacy on the Internet since email can be intercepted and read.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What aspects of the topic might be focal points in your project?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What new questions do you have about the topic after reading this encyclopedia entry?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Topic Focusing**

Almost any topic can be approached from a variety of perspectives, and many topics could become an entire life’s work. In *The Secret Life of Dust*, author Hannah Holmes demonstrates that even a seemingly tiny topic can become an entire book—she’s written 240 pages on dust! For most students, research projects must be considerably shorter.

**Too Broad, Too Narrow, Just Right**

A topic that is too broad will be difficult to research because it includes too many possibilities. Focusing a topic is particularly important when you need to make an argument. Freedom is too broad, but a specific freedom such as Intellectual Freedom, is more focused. Still, such a topic will need more focus for most college research papers. Remember too, that the scope of a topic can depend on the size of the project.

Several strategies can help narrow a broad topic. Consider:

- A specific aspect of a topic (laws that affect intellectual freedom -- the Patriot Act)
- The perspective of a specific group of people or a geographic area (intellectual freedom in China)
- A specific event or issue in combination with the topic (intellectual freedom and art)
- Time frame (intellectual freedom during the Civil Rights Movement)

Just as a broad topic can cause research troubles, so can a topic that is too narrow. Unless you plan to do primary research, you research depends on information others have already produced about your topic. If that information doesn’t exist, you may need to broaden your approach. Ask yourself whether your topic is too new, too localized, or too obscure to have generated enough information for meaningful research.

Consider Censorship in Seattle’s schools. While this topic might intrigue you, you could discover that little has been written about it. Perhaps there have been few cases of censorship in Seattle schools. Or maybe only local newspapers have reported on this issue, limiting your information sources to a few newspaper articles.

You could broaden your topic by focusing on:

- A larger associated issue or problem (censorship in education, using Seattle as a case study)
• A larger geographic focus (censorship in U.S. schools)
• Key players in the topic (school boards, PTA, parents, religious organizations, or publishers)

**The Evolving Research Topic**

Live and learn. So it is with research. As you learn more about your topic, you will discover the important terms used to describe it and the best types of information sources for your particular topic. And, you may revise early assumptions that you made based on a more limited understanding of your topic. That process is what research is all about: finding new knowledge, integrating it with what you already know, and revising your assumptions.

**Key Terms**

Every topic has important words, often called keywords, which are used in the writing about it. These terms are your "keys" to unlocking the research resources available at your library and on the Internet. You can use key terms to search for your topic—or aspects of it—in the indexes of reference books and other books, library catalogs, periodical databases, and Web search engines.

Some of these library research tools use subject headings, or standardized key terms, while others rely primarily on keywords as they appear within the text of a given source. Learn more about the difference between subject headings and keywords in Chapter 8.

As you become more fluent in the language of your topic, write down all new terms you discover. Most topics include more than one major concept for which a list of key terms could be generated. List the major concepts in your topic and write down synonyms and different forms of the same key term for each concept. Your list of terms will be useful each time you search in a new library resource.

**Nature of Topic**

The nature of your topic will help determine where you find the most useful information. When you begin a research project, you can only speculate on the best sources of information. By the end of your pre-search process, you should start to develop a better idea of where the most productive searches will lead. But you must begin somewhere. Consider:

• Where would your topic fit in the publication cycle? Is it very current? Or, has it been around long enough to have been the subject of a book?

• Who would be likely to produce information about your topic and where is that information likely to be published?

• If the Internet seems like a possible source, what types of Web sites might provide information?

• Is your topic a sub-topic of a larger issue? What broader subjects should you keep in mind? Where would this information be published?

**Summary**

Choosing and focusing a topic involves several steps, some of which you may revisit to as you understand your topic better:

1. Understand your assignment and brainstorm topic ideas.
2. Choose an interesting topic and find background information in a general encyclopedia.
3. Determine the academic disciplines most likely to study your topic and find your topic in subject encyclopedias.
4. Narrow or broaden your topic to make it more manageable.
5. Note the key terms and nature of your topic.

**Thought Questions**

- In your opinion, what are the most important characteristics of a good topic?
- If you begin with a good idea for a topic, which of the above steps could still help you get started? Why?
- What purpose(s) do academic disciplines serve throughout the research process?
- How does the information in general and subject encyclopedias differ? How are they each useful?

**Table 3.1 Partial List of Academic Disciplines**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sciences</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agriculture</strong></td>
<td>The study of all processes and services, both nonfarm and farm, involved in producing products from plants and animals for the consumer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Astronomy</strong></td>
<td>The study of celestial bodies, their composition, distances, motions, and the laws that control them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Biology</strong></td>
<td>The study of living organisms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Botany</strong></td>
<td>The study of plant life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chemistry</strong></td>
<td>The study of the composition, structure, and properties of matter and of changes in matter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engineering</strong></td>
<td>The study of the properties of matter and the sources of power in nature that are made useful in structures, machines, and manufactured products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geology</strong></td>
<td>The study of the history of the earth, forces or agencies acting on the earth, and particularly the evidences of such history as revealed in rock formations and earth strata.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mathematics</strong></td>
<td>The science that explains the relations existing between quantities and operations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medicine</strong></td>
<td>The science and art dealing with the prevention, cure, or alleviation of disease.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oceanography</strong></td>
<td>The study of the sea, including the sea's physical boundaries, the chemistry and physics of sea water, and marine biology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military Science</strong></td>
<td>The study of methods of war or armies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physics</strong></td>
<td>The study of matter and energy, including the study of phenomena associated with mechanics, heat, wave motion, sound, electricity, magnetism, light, and atomic and nuclear structure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>