

# How to Formulate a Good Research Topic

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Jan 10, 2019

## Introduction

Many students think that choosing their research topic is the most exciting part of their course. It is important to choose something that will sustain your interest throughout the months that you will need to complete it. You may even decide to do some research on something that forms part of your leisure activities!

Before you start your research you need to have at least some idea of what you want to do. This is probably the *most difficult*, and yet *the most important*, part of your research. If you are not clear about what you are going to research, *it is difficult to plan how you are going to research it*. This reminds us Formulating and clarifying the research topic is the starting point of your research. Once you are clear about this, you will be able to choose the most appropriate research strategy and data collection and analysis techniques. ***The formulating and clarifying process is time consuming and will probably take you up blind alleys.*** However, without spending time on this stage you are far less likely to be successful in your research.

## Attributes of a Good Research Topic

The attributes of a research topic do not vary a great deal between universities, although there will be differences in the emphasis placed on these attributes. If you are undertaking your research as part of a course of study then the most important attribute will be that it meets the examining body's requirements and, in particular, that it is at the correct level. *This means that you must choose your topic with care.* For example, some universities require students to collect their own data as part of their research, whereas others allow them to base their project on data that have already been collected. Alternatively, some ask you to undertake an organization-based piece of applied research, while others simply say that it must be within the subject matter of your course or programme.

In addition, *your research topic must be something you are capable of undertaking and one that excites your imagination*. Capability can be considered in a variety of ways. At the personal level you need to feel comfortable that you have, or can develop, the skills that will be required to research the topic. As well as having the necessary skills we believe that you also *need to have a genuine interest in the topic*. A topic in which you are only vaguely interested at the start is likely to become a topic in which you have no interest and with which you will fail to produce your best work.

Your ability to find the financial and time resources to undertake research on the topic will also affect your capability. Some topics are unlikely to be possible to complete in the time allowed by your course of study. This may be because they require you to measure the impact of an intervention over a long time period. Similarly, topics that are likely to require you to travel widely or need expensive equipment should also be disregarded unless financial resources permit. Capability also means you must be reasonably certain of gaining access to any data you might need to collect. *Many people start with ideas where access to data will prove difficult*. Certain, more sensitive topics, such as financial performance or decision-making by senior managers, are potentially fascinating.

*One of the attributes of a good topic is a clearly defined research question(s), aim and objectives*. These will, along with a *good knowledge of the literature*, enable you to assess the extent to which your research is likely to provide new insights into the topic. Many students believe this is going to be difficult. Fortunately, there are numerous ways in which such insight can be defined as new.

### **Attributes of a Good Research Topic (Checklist)**

- ✓ Is the topic something with which you are really *fascinated about*?
- ✓ Do you have, or can you develop within the research time frame, the necessary research skills to undertake the topic?
- ✓ Is the research topic achievable within the available time?
- ✓ Will the topic still be current when you finish your project?

- ✓ Is the topic achievable within the financial resources that are likely to be available?
- ✓ Are you reasonably certain of being able to gain *access to data you are likely to require for this topic?*
- ✓ Appropriateness: is it worthwhile?
- ✓ Does the topic fit the specifications and meet the standards set by the examining institution?
- ✓ Does your topic contain issues that have a clear link to theory?
- ✓ Are you able to *state your research question(s), aim and objectives clearly?*
- ✓ Will your proposed research be able to provide fresh insights into this topic?
- ✓ Does your topic relate clearly to the idea you have been given (perhaps by an organization)?
- ✓ Are the findings for this topic likely to be symmetrical: that is, of similar value whatever the outcome?
- ✓ Does the topic match your career goals?

## **How to Generate Research Ideas**

If you have not been given an initial research idea there is a range of techniques that can be used to find and select a topic that you would like to research. They can be thought of as those that are predominantly rational thinking and those that involve more creative thinking. Below are the techniques.

### **1. Examining your own strengths and interests**

It is important that you choose a topic in which you are likely to do well and, if possible, already have some academic knowledge. One way of doing this is to look at those assignments for which you have received good grades. For most of these assignments they are also likely to be the topics in which you were interested. They will provide you with an area in which to search and find a research idea. In addition, you may, as part of your reading, be able to focus more precisely on the sort of ideas about which

you wish to conduct your research. There is the need to think about your future. If you plan to work in financial management, it would be sensible to choose a research project in the financial management field. One part of your course that will inevitably be discussed at any job interview is your research project. A research in the same field will provide you with the opportunity to display clearly your depth of knowledge and your enthusiasm.

## **2. Examining staff research interests**

You may follow the links within your institution's website to the profile pages of academic staff. These pages are likely to display information about their teaching and research interests. You may be able to use this as a funnel to help you to explore and generate research ideas in which you would be interested for your own project. In very many cases, these pages will provide you with the overall subject area taught by each member of staff. These pages are also likely to list the particular research interests of each member of staff within her or his subject area. In many cases, a member of staff will offer a short commentary on her or his research interests which will provide more specific details. Lists of publications and conference papers with hyperlinks to online copies may be included. These will provide even more detail about the exact nature of the research interests of a member of staff. Working through this information may allow you to generate ideas for your own research and guide you to some initial reading to test this interest.

## **3. Looking at past research titles**

Many students find looking at past thesis/dissertations as a useful way of generating research ideas. A common way of doing this is to scan your university's list of past thesis/dissertations titles for anything that captures your imagination. Titles that look interesting or which grab your attention should be noted down as should any thoughts you have about the title in relation to your own research idea. In this process the fact that the title is poorly worded or the thesis/dissertations received a low mark is immaterial. What matters is the fact that you have found a topic that interests you. Based on this you can think of new ideas in the same general area that will enable you to provide fresh insights. Scanning actual thesis/dissertations may also produce research ideas. However, you need to beware. The fact that a thesis/dissertation is in your library is no guarantee of the quality of the arguments and observations it contains. In many universities all projects are placed in the library whether they are bare passes or distinctions.

#### **4. Discussion**

Colleagues, friends and university tutors are all potentially good sources of possible research ideas. Often research tutors will have ideas for possible student thesis/dissertations, which they will be pleased to discuss with you. Ideas can also be obtained by talking to people who work in or have direct experience of the topic area in which you are interested to develop a research idea. People who have experience of a topic area may include managers and other practitioners such as accountants, business analysts, marketing executives, human resource administrators, purchasing or sales staff as well as many others. Members of professional groups or workplace representatives may also provide you with insights that help to generate research ideas. Your contact with such people at an early stage may be fortuitous.

#### **5. Searching existing literature**

As part of your discussions, relevant literature may also be suggested. There are various types of literature that are of particular use for generating research ideas.

These include:

- Articles in academic journals;
- Articles in professional journals;
- Reports;
- Books.

Academic journal articles are intended to produce a theoretical contribution and will therefore contain a section that reviews literature relevant to the article's topic area. Given the nature of published research, journal articles are generally highly specialized, focusing on a particular subject. You will need to be prepared to undertake an extensive search lasting some hours (or even days) to find articles that might be helpful in generating research ideas related to your broader topic of interest. Of particular use, where you can find suitable ones, are academic review articles. Some journals focus on publishing review articles – so look out for these! These articles contain a considered review of the state of knowledge in a particular topic area and are therefore likely to contain a wealth of ideas about that area. These ideas will act as pointers towards aspects where further research needs to be undertaken. In addition, you can browse recent publications online, in particular journals, for possible research ideas.

Reports may also be of use. The most recently published are usually up to date and, again, often contain recommendations that may form the basis of your research idea.

Books by contrast may be less up to date than other written sources. They often, however, contain a good overview of research that has been undertaken, which may suggest ideas to you.

Searching for publications is only possible when you have at least some idea of the area in which you wish to undertake your research. One way of obtaining this is to re-examine your lecture notes and course textbooks and to note those subjects that appear most interesting and the names of relevant authors. This will give you a basis on which to undertake a preliminary search.

## **6. Scanning the media**

Keeping up to date with items in the news can be a very rich source of ideas. The stories which occur every day in the 'broadsheet' or 'compact' newspapers, in both online and traditional print versions, may provide ideas which relate directly to the item (e.g. the extent to which items sold by supermarkets contravene the principles of 'green consumerism' by involving excessive 'food miles' in order to import them). The stories in these media may also suggest other ideas which flow from the central story (e.g. the degree to which a company uses its claimed environmental credentials as part of its marketing campaign).

## **7. Keeping a notebook of your ideas**

One of the more creative techniques that we all use is to keep a notebook of ideas. This involves simply noting down any interesting research ideas as you think of them and, of equal importance, what sparked off your thought. You can then pursue the idea using more rational thinking techniques later. You may keep a notebook by your bed so you can jot down any flashes of inspiration that occur to you in the middle of the night!

## **8. Exploring personal preferences using past thesis/dissertation**

One way to generate and evaluate research ideas is to explore your personal preferences by reading through a number of past thesis/dissertation from your university.

## 9. Brainstorming

The technique of brainstorming can also be used to generate and refine research ideas. It is best undertaken with a group of people, although you can brainstorm on your own. Brainstorming involves a number of stages:

- i. Defining the problem. This will focus on the sorts of ideas you are interested in as precisely as possible. In the early stages of formulating a topic this may be as vague as, 'I am interested in marketing but don't know what to do for my research topic'.
- ii. Asking for suggestions. These will relate to the problem.
- iii. Recording suggestions. As you record these you will need to observe the following rules:
  - No suggestion should be criticized or evaluated in any way before all ideas have been considered.
  - All suggestions, however wild, should be recorded and considered.
  - As many suggestions as possible should be recorded.
- iv. Reviewing suggestions. You will seek to explore what is meant by each as you review these.
- v. Analyzing suggestions. Work through the list of ideas and decide which appeal to you most as research ideas and why.

## **Conclusion**

If you follow the above guidelines, you'll be able to come up with a good research topic.



I'm Dr. Anderson and I am a professional research writer, coach, mentor proofreader, and editor with over twelve years of experience. My expertise cuts across many fields of study. I am passionate about research and guiding newbie researchers. I provide personalized research services and customer satisfaction is my utmost priority. I don't compromise on quality, plagiarism, and deadlines. If you need help with research, get in touch at [anderson@academiaresearchexperts.com](mailto:anderson@academiaresearchexperts.com)  
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