

MOVING FROM AN INTEREST TO A RESEARCH QUESTION

From an Interest to a Topic

“A research topic is an interest defined narrowly enough for you to imagine becoming a local expert on it.” (Booth et al., page 41) You should select a topic of great interest to you. “Nothing contributes to the quality of your work more than your commitment to it.” However, you must remember that you will have to interest the Research Advisor and a Thesis Director in this topic. Much of the work you will do in this class will help you create that interest. It's great to have an interesting new spin on a subject, but if there is little to no research on the topic then it becomes very difficult to support the thesis.

The word *research* means “finding out” or “discovery”, by use of systematic effort, information or answers to something you want to know. You cannot research if you do not want to know anything; i.e., you must have something you would like to know more about before you can do research.

So, keep this in mind as you move forward.

“Your readers expect you to do more than just mound up and report data; they expect you to report it in a way that continues the ongoing conversation between writers and readers that creates a community of researchers. To do that, you must select from all the data you find just those data that support an answer to a question that solves a problem your readers think needs solving.” (Booth et al., page 40)

The best way to start is to read books on the topic or use a general encyclopedia. You can also talk to others about the topic (e.g., fellow students, others interested in that area, or your Instructor). You should then look at the primary literature (i.e., journals) to see who is writing about this topic. Why are they so interested in the topic? With the initial scoping complete, you can turn to the Internet to find out more about your topic. As you skim or survey a wide variety of materials, you will gain background knowledge in this topic.

A beginner’s mistake is to rush from a topic to a data dump. Students have been conditioned to go straight to searching out sources. They accumulate a lot of notes and information then write it all up in a report. Teachers often give the report a good grade because it shows that the student can focus on a topic, find data on it, and assemble those data into a report! However, this kind of writing will not receive a passing grade in the proseminar course! If you do not ask a question worth pondering, you can offer no focused answer worth reading. “Readers of research papers don’t want just information; they want the answer to a question worth asking.” (Booth et al, page 45)

Researchers collect information to use as evidence in support of their claims. Booth et al refer to information by using the term, *data*. “We mean anything you find that might support your answer to a question or solution to a problem. Data are inert, however, until you use them as evidence to support a claim. If you have not collected more data than you can use, you haven’t found enough.” (Booth et al, page 39)

From a Broad topic to a Focused One

You need to move past the old inbred scenario:

“Teacher, I know so much less than you, who will give me a grade. So my role is to show you how much information I dug up, an yours is to decide whether I’ve found enough.” (Booth et al., page 19)

The ALM Guide states (page 41): “A research problem must involve ***original research***. The point of a thesis is not simply to put together the views of other people, in the form of a series of article reviews – ‘the book report approach.’ Although a legitimate stage in virtually everyone’s research project, this method alone does not constitute true research. In addition, the project must show ***independent thinking***. This is another reason to keep the research question tightly focused – you cannot do original thinking on a subject if it has not yet been adequately defined.”

Our discussion of critical thinking should help you develop and demonstrate that your topic involves original research and independent thinking. You should document this “proof” in your notes.

Booth et al (pages 37-38) suggest the following steps to plan your research topic:

1. Find a topic specific enough to let you master a reasonable amount of information on it.
2. Ask questions about that topic until you find some that catch your interest.
3. Determine what kind of evidence that your readers will expect in support of your answers.
4. Determine whether you can find sources that have those data.

Expect to do a lot of writing along the way to finding your research question. Make sure you take notes and keep track of your sources. It would be helpful to use software like ***End Note*** to do this. You will need to become familiar with the APA Style since it is required for your ALM thesis and thesis proposal. Some of your writing should go beyond normal note-taking. You should spend time writing to understand.

“Draw diagrams (mind maps or concept maps) to connect disparate facts; summarize sources, positions, and schools; record even random thoughts. You

never know what will pay off. If you write as you go, you'll encourage your own best *critical thinking*, understand your sources better, and draft more effectively when that time comes." (Booth et al., page 38)

Writing a thesis is *thinking in print* and thinking from the *point of view of your readers*. When you write with others in mind, you give your ideas the critical attention they need and deserve.

"You disentangle them from your memories and wishes, so that you – and others – can explore, expand, combine and understand them more fully. Thinking in written form for others can be more careful, more sustained, more attuned to those with different views – more thoughtful – than just about any other kind of thinking." (Booth et al., page 15)

Booth et al. (pages 20 – 22) presents three potential roles for you to satisfy your readers:

1. I've found something really interesting;
2. I've found a solution to a practical problem; or
3. I've found an answer to a *question* important to you.

When you adopt one of these three roles, you create one half of the relationship between you and your readers. You create the other half when you write in a way that casts your readers in a complementary role, one giving them a specific reason to read your thesis. To do that, you have to imagine them as the kind of readers who expect you to do what you in fact intend to do. In creating those roles, you offer your reader a social contract: I'll do my part if you do yours. But if you offer them a role they are unwilling to adopt, you are likely to lose them entirely. It is very important to keep this in mind when we talk about the roles of the Research Advisor and the Thesis Director. What they want is for you to tell them something they don't know, not just for its own sake, but so that they can better understand something new about the topic.

Don't expect to agree 100 percent on every aspect of the topic with those whose writing you read. Resolve those differences with your writing and talking to others in the class, including the Instructor. "Be amiably skeptical of most of the research you read, to question it, even as you realize how thoroughly you depend on it." (Booth et al., page 11)

Booth et al. has a section on *writing in groups* (pages 26 – 30). This proseminar experience should offer you such a group to help you with your writing as you help them and learn more yourself.

Booth et al. also offers some practical advice on this aspect of preparing your thesis proposal – *managing the unavoidable problem of inexperience* (pages 30 – 31):

- Be aware that there are uncertainties and anxieties that you cannot avoid.

- Get control over your topic by writing about it along the way. Don't just retype, cut-and-paste, or photocopy sources: write summaries, critiques, questions. The more you write as you go, no matter how sketchily, the more confidently you will face that intimidating first draft.
- Understand the whole process by breaking it into manageable steps, but be aware that those steps are mutually supporting. Once you find a topic and formulate a good research question, you'll draft and revise more effectively. Conversely, if you anticipate how you will draft and revise, you can more effectively find a problem.
- Count on your Instructor and classmates to understand your struggles. This Instructor wants you to succeed and you can expect his assistance.

Set realistic goals. You do something significant when you wind up each step feeling that you have changed what you think and that your readers think you did it soundly, even if they don't agree. Most important, recognize the struggle for this learning experience. Press on, confident that it will turn out OK – perhaps even better than OK.

From a Broad Topic to a Focused One

At this point, the topic is probably too broad. You need to start narrowing the topic. Booth et al (pages 43 – 45) suggest writing the title of the topic on a page and adding words and phrases that include words like: ***conflict, description, contribution, and development***. The authors claim that when you use nouns derived from verbs, you move your topic a step closer to a ***claim*** that your readers might find significant.

THE MOST FREQUENT SINGLE REASON THESIS PROPOSALS ARE RETURNED TO THE STUDENT BY THE RESEARCH ADVISOR IS THE FAILURE TO ADEQUATELY FOCUS THE TOPIC. This point cannot be stressed too strongly. What is meant by “adequately focus”? Perhaps it is easiest to answer this question by pointing to topics that would be considered inadequately focused. (ALM Guide; page 47)

A topic lacks focus if:

- **It deals with a complex issue studied over an entire century or more**, e.g., “Anglo-American diplomacy from 1880 to 1980” instead of “Anglo-American diplomacy from 1880 to 1890.”
- **It deals with the complete works of a prolific author**, e.g., “The novels of Henry James” rather than *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ambassadors*.
- **It focuses on general rather than on specific problems**, e.g., “Urban housing” instead of “The Pierce Housing Estate.”
- **It asks no question or presents no hypothesis**, e.g., “The marsupials of modern Australia” rather than “Can the marsupials of modern Australia compete successfully with eutherian mammals?”

Narrowing your topic is not done by following a step-by-step formula. It is integrated with library research. One way to narrow your topic is to learn more about it -- expose yourself to background information. As you begin to understand more about your topic, you will see better where you might want to go.

You need to keep your Research Advisor in mind as you narrow your topic.

“Writing for others demands more from you than writing for yourself. By the time you fix your ideas in writing, they are so familiar to you that you need help to see them not for what you want them to be but for what they really are. You reach that end only by imagining, and then meeting, the needs and expectations of others: you create a kind of transaction between you and your readers – what we like to call a *rhetorical community*.” (Booth et al., page 14)

A more specific topic also helps you see gaps, puzzles, and inconsistencies that you can ask about when you turn your topic into a *research question*. A specific topic can also serve as your *working title*, a short answer when someone asks you what you are working on. Be cautioned not to narrow your topic so much that you can't find enough data on it.

There is even an Internet site dedicated to narrowing a topic in a research paper. You might want to look at it if you are having problems with this aspect of preparing your thesis proposal. <http://otel.uis.edu/yoder/narrowlitrev.htm>

At some point you should be prepared to create your *elevator speech*. How would you describe your project to a stranger in an elevator during the short ride from one floor to another? “It should describe your question or problem, the kind of claim you expect to offer, and the kind of evidence that supports it.” Practice your elevator speech at every opportunity (i.e., the course BLOG, in class, to your classmates, to anyone else that will listen) until you can explain your project in a way that everyone thinks is *clear* and *interesting*. *The object here is to find the “accept the thesis proposal” button.* Please try to summarize what will make your thesis a compelling and worthwhile investment for the thesis director and others researchers in the discipline. Try to sell your idea as you would sell it to a book customer.

When developing your pitch, think realistically about why a busy research advisor or thesis director would really care enough to spend time reading your thesis proposal. Consider these questions. What are the most valuable outcomes for the reader? What are the opportunities it will create or problems it will solve? List them. In a competitive thesis advisor market, how will it be different? In effect, what is the thesis proposal's unique selling proposition? If you can sell it to the proseminar Instructor, then you can better sell it to the research advisor and thesis director of your choice.

Remember, you will probably only have a few minutes to convince the thesis director to accept your thesis idea, and so it is vital that you have an engaging and resonantly simple selling pitch. A good question to answer is this: "*what additional*

grants or publications will I get if I accept this student's request to be their thesis director?"

You should try the elevator pitch again after you have prepared a research questions. This is a good tool to help keep you very focused.

From a Focused Topic to Questions

Your research question is the most critical part of your thesis proposal effort – it defines your proposal, it guides your arguments and inquiry, and it provokes the interests of your research advisor and thesis director. If your question does not work well, no matter how strong the rest of the thesis proposal, it is unlikely that the research advisor will accept the proposal as you have written it. Because of this, it is common to spend more time on the researching, conceptualizing and forming of each individual word of the research question than on any other part of the proposal.

You should spend a lot of time to write a strong research question. This course will provide you with an incentive and perhaps some methods to help you do this. Consider what drew you to your topic. What about it excites you and matters to you? Listen to yourself and start formulating the question by following your own interests in the topic. You have already done a lot of research and writing on the topic to get help focus it for this effort. So sit at your computer or with a note pad and start crafting the question itself. Write a lot of questions down over a couple of days. A good research questions should be evocative, relevant, clear, and researchable.

<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/DissPropWorkshop/nuts&bolts/question.html>

You will discover that framing your question is the first thing you, as a good researcher, should do. Serious researchers do not report data for their own sake, but to support the answer to a question that they (and they hope their readers) think is obviously worth asking.

“In a thesis, you have to reverse the roles of teacher and student. As a researcher, you have to adopt the role of someone who knows what others need to know and to cast your reader as someone who doesn't know but needs to. That will be easier when you find a **research question** that you want to answer and your teacher can't, without your help.” (Booth et al., page 19)

To develop a strong research question from your ideas, you should ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do I know the field and its literature well?
2. What are the important research questions in my field?
3. What areas need further exploration?
4. Could my research fill a gap? Lead to greater understanding?
5. Has a great deal of research already been conducted in this topic area?
6. Has this study been done before? If so, is there room for improvement?

7. Is the timing right for this question to be answered? Is it a hot topic or is it becoming obsolete?
8. Would I need funding or more time than the ALM guide to complete the work?
9. Most importantly, will my research attract the interest of a potential thesis director?

The best way to find out what you do not know about a topic is to barrage it with questions. First ask the predictable ones. Also ask the standard journalistic questions: *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*, but focus on *how* and *why*. Additionally you should ask four kinds of analytical questions about the composition, history, categorization, and values of your topic. Record the questions, but don't stop for answers. Consider the following (Booth et al., pages 46 – 47):

1. Identify the parts and how they interrelate. Use systems thinking.
 - a. What are the parts of your topic and how do they relate to one another?
 - b. How is your topic part of a larger system?
2. Trace the history of the topic and its role in a larger history.
 - a. How and why has your topic changed through time as something with its own history?
 - b. How and why is your topic an episode in a larger history?
3. Identify its characteristics and the categories that include it.
 - a. What kind of thing is your topic? What is its range of variation? How are instances of it similar to and different from one another?
 - b. To what larger categories can your topic be assigned? How does that help us understand it?
4. Determine its value.
 - a. What values does your topic reflect? What values does it support? Contradict?
 - b. How good or bad is your topic? Is it useful?

An ALM thesis asks a question and answers it with a proposition or hypothesis supported by evidence, which may or may not include empirical research, but must include *original thought*. What do we mean by “original thought?” We do not mean that you must think of something that no one else has ever thought of before! We do mean that you should come up with a hypothesis and offer supporting evidence in the thesis that does not rely solely on the authority of others to support your point. The argument, in other words, involves an interpretation that is your explanation of why things are the way they are and offers evidence that you have gathered, the sum total of which makes a contribution to our knowledge and understanding of a particular topic. (ALM Guide, page 41)

The ALM Guide states (page 14): “All good research starts with a question. How does one see or think of a question? How do questions occur? To answer this, we need first to

examine more closely just what a “question” is. “A matter of discussion or debate,” “subject to doubt,” “problem,” “matter to be inquired into”— these are the more common dictionary definitions of the word. Especially pertinent is the notion of *problem*, not with the pejorative connotation of something wrong, but in the sense of matter to be inquired into, curiosity, discrepancy, incongruity. The world is full of such problems and incongruities, but to see them requires an active, thoughtful, skeptical mindset, and a good deal of self-trust.

In general the problems have to do with unusual circumstances or matters in some way not typical, not expected, not fitting smoothly together: an Asian person wearing a Scottish kilt; a street person paying for a pretzel with a hundred-dollar bill; or, in a more academic context, block after block of houses torn down but no highway being built; the relatively large number of Cambodians living in Lowell; a play by a dramatist in a style that is quite different from all of his other works. A subset of such incongruity comprises questions of veracity or truth. These involve being skeptical or suspending belief about something, not automatically believing something just because it has been stated, whether in conversation, in print, or on television. For example, we may note that in today’s speech the President contradicted statements she made last week; the news item claimed that alcoholism has a genetic basis, but the Scientific American article emphasized that the data are ambiguous. Life experiences, such as parenting and pursuing a profession, can raise research-worthy questions just as valid as those raised in the classroom, the library, and the laboratory. Since it is our conviction that discovering questions suitable for thesis research requires little more than common sense and conscious awareness of the world, we will set aside questions of veracity and concentrate on perception of general incongruity. If we can allow ourselves to be conscious of the component parts of a situation, questions will necessarily follow.”

The ALM Guide presents (pages 14 – 16) some interesting examples of how research questions were developed. You should read this material.

“Has someone else already answered the question satisfactorily? Since many theses rely heavily and even exclusively on written materials to answer their questions, the issue is not whether we can construct an answer based on information from the literature. Rather, can we find “our” question stated and answered as such, in a text, journal, or dissertation? If so, it ***may not be appropriate as a research topic unless we disagree with an already-stated answer.*** Even if we can find several published sources that seem to address our question and posit answers to it, they may not necessarily be correct answers. We must be prepared to investigate their answers; and if we find them flawed in some way, our own research may become a refutation of these views and may substitute a new answer to the already-stated question.

Learning is rarely a straight-line phenomenon and is definitely process rather than product. Do not be impatient. A wonderful fringe benefit of testing questions for research suitability is that you get to do this exploratory reading and thus learn about assorted interesting things. Even once you have decided upon a question or a hypothesis and it has passed the “suitability test,” the question, like the hypothesis, may change and change

again, as we think and read more about it. We answer some parts of it, reject others, and discover still others.”

When you have asked a lot of questions, it’s time to evaluate them. Set aside questions whose answers you could look up in a reference. Questions that ask *who, what, when, or where* are important. However, they may ask only about matters of settled fact – not original thought. **Questions that ask *how* and *why* are more likely to invite deeper research and lead to more interesting answers.** (Booth et al., page 48)

Next, try to combine smaller questions into larger, more significant ones. Once you settle on a question or two (or three), you have a guide to doing your research more systematically. A question narrows your search to only those data you need to answer the question. And once you have an answer you think you can support with evidence, you know it’s time to stop looking for the question. This is different than having just a topic. The data you can find on the topic is virtually endless. You would never know when you have had enough.

The Instructor will introduce you to a number of diagramming tools that might help you ask better questions when you can actually “see” relationships and perspectives in the topic material that is diagrammed. But remember, it is only a tool to help you get to the point where you have an operational question early in this course. You have plenty of time to refine the question. This refining process may even continue after the course before you present the thesis proposal to the research advisor.

Your most important goal in this process is to find questions than challenge you or arouse your intense curiosity. Finding good questions is an essential step in the preparation of your thesis.

From a Merely Interesting Question to a “WOW” Question

Once you have a question that commands your interest, you need to pose tougher questions to yourself: ***Why should this question also command the interest of my readers? What makes it worth asking?*** (Booth et al., page 49) Start by asking, ***So what?*** Eventually you will have to answer this question not just for yourself but for your readers – the Research Advisor, the Thesis Director, and the research community at large. You can work toward an answer in three steps:

1. Name your topic.
2. Add a question.
3. Motivate your question.

This last step is a difficult one for the novice researcher. “Add another indirect question, a bigger and more general one that explains why you are asking your first question. Introduce this second implied question with ***in order to help my reader understand how, why, or whether.***” (Booth et al., page 51) It’s your answer to this third step that will give you a claim on your reader’s interest. “If that larger question touches on issues important

to your field, even indirectly, then you have reason to think that your readers should care about its answer to the smaller, prior question you raise in step 2.”

To summarize – your aim is to explain:

1. What you are going to write your thesis about – your topic;
2. What you don’t know about it – your question; and
3. Why you want your reader to know about it – your rationale.

Although it will be a great struggle, you must take this last step. Answering that last question will help you create the relationship you are working to establish with the rest of your research community. “It’s your ticket into the conversation.” (Booth et al., page 52)

The ALM Guide calls this a *focused question* (page 40). “Not every question is an appropriate one, because not every question can be answered within the time and page allotment or with the research materials readily available to the ALM students.

Working Bibliography

“The working bibliography should be selective. It should not simply include all the materials that **might** conceivably be used in the finished research. Rather, it should demonstrate that you have actually read the sources you cite, know which further sources you will need to consult, and why. The bibliography, in other words, represents an interim tally of your progress.”

“The working bibliography should include **most** of the materials that will actually be used in the finished research project. It should list under separate rubrics all works cited in the proposal (**Works Cited**); all works consulted in preparation of the proposal (**Works Consulted**); and all works that the student intends to consult in further research and writing (**Works to Be Consulted**). Sources within these various rubrics can be further divided into *primary* and *secondary* works, or according to the various *media* they represent (books, journals, recordings, interviews, on-line databases), if you wish to do so. In the biological and behavioral sciences, sources must be listed alphabetically by author as in an *APA style* reference list. Titles listed under one rubric should not be repeated in another. Sources included under Works Consulted should be accompanied by a **brief description** of the work’s contents and value for the investigation—the so-called “**annotated bibliography**,” formatted thus:

Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology. Selection and commentary by Eric Fernie. London: Phaidon Press, 1996. An exceptional collection of essays presenting chronologically the range of art history methods from antiquity to the present.

Burgin, Victor. *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1988. Argues that traditional

“art theory,” dating from the Enlightenment through Modernism, has now been supplanted by the general postmodern goal of understanding how symbolic expression represents diverse forms of sociality and subjectivity.

In the past, some students have tried to satisfy the requirement for a working bibliography by simply appending a printout of titles generated by a computer search in the area of their topic. **This is not acceptable.** Students should not haphazardly compile a lengthy but meaningless bibliography. The bibliography should represent actual work done, and it should reflect an organized approach to the research problem. Thus it will assist the research advisor in assessing the nature and direction of the student’s research and will facilitate suggestions for additional reading by the thesis director. **The working bibliography should be prepared in the *APA form* required for the finished thesis.** (ALM Guide, page 45)

Organizing for Success

You will only have a short time in this course to prepare the thesis proposal. In order to shave some valuable time off the thesis proposal acceptance cycle, you need to concentrate on all that this proseminar course can offer. The Instructor is presenting you with some ideas of creating some files on your computer. These files will collect information and allow you to write in a framework that will make it easier for you to prepare your final thesis proposal in January. Get some kind of system set up early and use it every day!