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Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Developing a Research Question

Midway through a semester is no time to discover that your research topic is too broad or too narrow, or that your available sources are too skimpy or too difficult to locate. A preliminary search of your broad category will provide an overview from which to begin narrowing your topic.

The process will help you identify aspects that trigger your curiosity, establish some boundaries with which to limit your inquiry and lead you to some manageable research questions. Before selecting a topic for your research project you'll want to consider its scope: you'll want to narrow it from a broad category to a specific inquiry with some well-defined boundaries.

Once you've narrowed your research topic, you can begin shaping your question. Keep in mind that your question should be debatable and interesting.

If you begin with a broad, general interest in social problems in large cities, for instance, you might ask more specifically: "What happens to teenage runaways on the streets of Manhattan?"

Or, if you started with a general interest in contemporary architecture, a specific question might be: "Who in America today is good at designing sports arenas?"

Brainstorming

Brainstorming can help you define a research question. Take fifteen or twenty minutes and let your thoughts roam-jot down the questions that come to mind-even those that seem useless. When you look over your list, you may find one or two that appear more promising than others. Remember not to edit your ideas during the brainstorming session. Save your evaluation for later.

Sizing Up the More-Promising Questions

You're looking for manageability. Which questions are narrow enough for a fruitful investigation using the library, the Internet or some field work? Many will have too wide a scope for the time constraints of a semester. Here are some examples of too wide of a scope:

- How is the climate of the earth changing?
- Why does poverty exist?
- What's going on in outer space?

Too narrow of a question will also cause problems. Avoid restricting yourself to the point where finding relevant sources becomes difficult or impossible. For example:

- How did John F. Kennedy's maternal grandfather influence the decisions he made during his first month as president?

If one or two sources will answer your question, it may not be substantial enough to bother with, either. Your paper will be too thin, a summary rather than a true research paper. Avoid questions that can be answered with a simple yes or no, or a few statistics. In the end, they just aren't interesting enough to pursue.

- Are there more black students or white students in the freshman class this year?

The question doesn't have enough meat on the bone. By focusing on something more specific regarding a significant issue, you will find more and better

information. Your document will also be far more interesting to research and write. Questions regarding issues that people take seriously and about which they are more passionate inevitably lead to a livelier debate:

- What is the ratio of black students to white students on campus and how does it affect everyday student relations?

Honing Your Question

Honing your question is the final step. When your preliminary inquiry is tentatively shaped, ask yourself some questions about your question:

- Is the scope of your question appropriate: not too wide, not too narrow?
- Is it manageable within the time constraints allowed for the assignment?
- Will the answer fit the page and/or word requirements of the assignment?
- Can you find sufficient and timely information in the library?
- Will internet, websites, and field research produce more source material?
- Is your question simple enough to seek just one answer, not several?
- Is it specific enough that your audience will understand your objective?
- Will the results be interesting? Does it concern a real and debatable issue?
- Does your question really interest you? Do you honestly crave the answer?

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