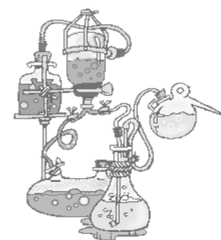


Research Paper 101 Series

Step Two: Developing a Topic

Let's return to the scientific method analogy. Do you remember your middle grade science fair project? Do plants grow in the dark? How many numbers can people remember? What is the best recipe for homemade Silly Putty? A good experiment begins with a good question. We are going to walk through the process of getting to that good question—the question that will ultimately drive your research paper.



Developing a topic involves choosing your topic, doing background research, refining your topic, and turning it into your research question.

1. *Choose your topic*

Read your assignment carefully. Has your professor provided you with a list of topics to choose from or do you need to choose your own topic? If you must choose your own topic, brainstorm a list of potential ideas. Think about topics covered in your course (or related to those covered) that you would like to study in more depth.

Whether you create the list or your professor provides it, ask yourself the following questions:

- Which topic interests you the most?
- What questions do you have about the topic?
- Would you like to learn more about the topic?

Eliminate topics that won't keep your attention. Circle ones that appeal to you. Keep at it until you can narrow it down to one.

2. *Gather general information*

Once you settle on a topic, begin background research to gain familiarity with the important ideas and issues surrounding your topic. Useful resources to consult in this stage are

- your course textbook, readings, and notes;
- reference sources such as encyclopedias;
- and general reference databases from the Archibald Library.
(<https://www.briercrest.ca/library/databases/general>)

While encyclopedias and textbook information won't make it to your research paper, it is still important to record bibliographic information for each source.

3. *Take Preliminary Notes*

For each reference, use a separate piece of paper, index card, or file (for electronic note-taking) to jot down main points, themes, key ideas, conflicts, and facts that are emerging. Once you've gone through your sources, follow these steps.

- a. Review all of your notes to get the big picture.
- b. Highlight recurring themes, topics, debates, etc.

- c. Reorganize this information by recurring themes that are emerging. You can do this in a few ways. One option is to place all the data you gathered on one page categorized by themes. A second option is to create a concept or mind map. Concept maps show relationships between people, ideas, events, and or concepts.

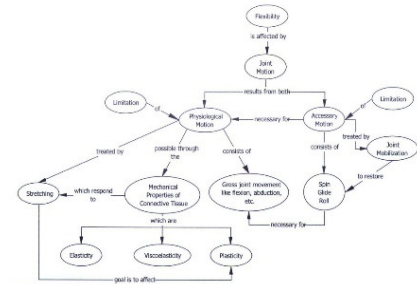


Figure 1 An example of a partial concept map for flexibility showing how concepts and propositions are related.

Use the emerging themes to refine your topic. A road map should begin to form that will guide you in developing your research question and eventually your thesis and outline.

4. Narrow or broaden your topic

Your background research will give you a feel for how much information is available on your topic. As a general rule, a longer research paper will cover more information (broader) than a shorter research paper (narrower). If you don't think you'll have enough to write about, broaden your topic; if you think there is too much, narrow it.

Here are some potential problems and solutions:

Problem:	Solution:
<p><i>Too much</i></p> <p>Your topic is too general and broad to cover in a short paper.</p> <p>Ex. <i>Disembodied brains in literature</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Add subtopic and time period: <i>The significance of disembodied brains in post-World War II fantasy literature</i> 2. Add a person(s), event, and/or a place: <i>The significance of the disembodied brain as represented by IT in Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time and Alcasan's brain in C.S. Lewis's That Hideous Strength</i>
<p><i>Too little</i></p> <p>Your topic is too detailed and narrow for the length of your paper.</p> <p>Ex. <i>Witold Pilecki's strategic imprisonment at Auschwitz in 1943 and its impact on the Allied resistance</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remove a subtopic, person(s) and/or time period: <i>How information about Auschwitz affected the allied resistance during World War II</i> 2. Remove a place and expand the time period: <i>Witold Pilecki's contributions to allied resistance during World War II</i>

4. Restate your topic as a research question

Start your question with who, what, where, why, when or how:

- **What** is the significance of the disembodied brain as represented by IT in Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* and by Alcasan's brain in C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength*?
- **How** did Witold Pilecki's contributions aid allied resistance during World War II?

Your question will guide your research and thesis development.

Next up... Research: Getting Started

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