

Choosing a Research Topic and Developing a Research Question

Choosing a Research Topic

Writing an academic paper can be challenging, if your research topic is either too broad, too specific, or lacks complexity. Here are a few tips for making your research and writing more productive.

Recognize the subjects covered by your research topic. Information in libraries and library databases is usually organized according to broad subjects. These broad subjects often correspond to university departments or faculties (e.g., Sociology, Nursing, etc.). Subjects may be interrelated and require you to search different sections of the library, its website, or multiple library databases.

Gather background information. Whether you have been assigned a research topic by your instructor or have chosen a topic on your own, gathering background information is the most important part of identifying a viable research topic. **Reference resources**, such as handbooks, encyclopedias, and textbooks will help you identify key terms and issues relevant to your topic. During your research, scan the references used in your sources for further reading ideas. In the case of books, peruse the table of contents and index for more information about your topic.

Developing a Research Question

In choosing a research topic, you have answered the *what?* component of research. Now you can be more granular and consider *who? when? where? why?* and *how?* questions, as you look at library materials. These questions will help you focus your research based on population group, geographic location, time period, and more. Here are a few suggestions for how to narrow the scope of your topic and shape your research question:

- Break down your research topic into smaller **components** and observe what categories and subdivisions emerge.
- Consider the causes and implications of **change** as well as emerging trends if your research topic is subject to change, such as a politician's career or crime statistics.
- Place your topic within the perspectives and methods of inquiry specific to your discipline by considering the traditions and **schools of thought** where your research topic belongs.
- Choose your **method of argument** and think about how it affects your research question: will you explain, define, compare and contrast, analyze, evaluate, survey, or review?
- **Extrapolate** from your sources to different contexts and draw your own unique connections between ideas.
- Be ready to **revise** and change your research question in response to your findings and your own evolving sense of the topic; research and writing are not a linear process.

This handout was developed based on ideas and terminology from chapter 2 of the following book:
Northey, M., & McKibbin, J. (2009). *Making sense: A student's guide to research and writing*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Academic Discipline: EDUCATION

Research Topic: Social determinants of health in Canada

Research Question: How are students affected by social determinants of health?

(Too broad: What age group of students? Which determinants of health? When and where?)

Research Question: How are social determinants of health affected by poverty?

(Too vague: Which social determinants of health? How do you measure poverty? Where and when?)

Research Question: Among New Brunswick's elementary students, how is a child's well-being, assessed based on school attendance, grade point average, and extracurricular activities, affected by income and family status (single/dual) of its primary guardians?

Thesis Statement: Income and family status have a significant effect on the well-being of elementary students in New Brunswick.

Academic Discipline: HISTORY

Research Topic: Social determinants of health in Canada

Research Question: How did social determinants of health become recognized measures of health?

(Too broad: which social determinants? In which part of the world?)

Research Question: When did the government implement social policies that improved the health of Canadians?

(Too vague: Which level of government? What area of social policy—health care, labour, education? How do you measure health?)

Research Question: How did New Brunswick's health policies under premier Louis Joseph Robichaud (1960-70) improve health care delivery and for which population group(s)?

Thesis Statement: Robichaud's health care policies improved the health outcomes for northern New Brunswickers in the 1960s and 1970s.

Academic Discipline: PSYCHOLOGY

Research Topic: Social determinants of health in Canada

Research Question: Does mental health care providers' perception of patients' social status influence the quality of mental health care service?

(Too broad: How do you assess social status? How will the quality of mental health care be measured? Which group of patients and which types of mental health care providers?)

Research Question: What is the relationship between the mental health profile of female high school students in Bathurst, New Brunswick and their level of physical activity?

(Too specific: When there isn't demographic data on your specific social group, you may have to either extrapolate to a larger sample or collect the data yourself.)

Research Question: How do social determinants of health in Canada, such as poverty (assessed based on income), affect the likelihood and severity of clinical depression in men and women over 50 years of age?

Thesis Statement: Social determinants of health in Canada have a moderate effect on the likelihood and severity of clinical depression in men and women over 50 years of age.

Academic Discipline: ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS

Research Topic: Social determinants of health in Canada

Research Question: How much does the Canadian Government spend annually in health care promotion?

(Too simple: Why is it important how much is spent on health promotion and who spends it? Consider the causes and implications of your topic, such as the aging population.)

Research Question: Do tax incentives that promote physical activity actually improve health outcomes?

(Too broad: Which types of tax incentives? How do you measure health outcomes? Which population group? Ask more open-ended questions.)

Research Question: Given the increasing financial burden of health care per capita in New Brunswick, how cost-effective have health promotion programs, such as anti-smoking programs, been on the working population across this province? In the workplace, cost effectiveness is measured based on a decrease in sick leave absenteeism and workplace productivity evaluations.

Thesis Statement: Health promotion programs in New Brunswick are a highly cost-effective measure for decreasing sick leave absenteeism and improving workplace productivity in the working population.