



CREATING A RESEARCHABLE QUESTION

You have been given a list of topics by your professor and a writing assignment with very specific instructions on what to do. You know that the process should be easy, but you may still be in a quandary about what to do next. This handout will help you overcome that stage of unknown and create a topic that is both researchable and manageable.

Step One: Read the Assignment

The information that your professor has given is designed to give you an idea of the context of the topic, the length of the assignment, and the research that is required. Obviously, you need to do less research for a 2 page essay than you need to do for a 10 page essay. The topic can suggest certain key words that will help you as you begin your research. However, there are some things that you need to think about before you start that research.

Step Two: Ask, what are the issues that are implied by the topic?

Before you even go to the library to begin your search for materials, you should draw an ideas map. What are the key words associated with this topic that your professor has given you? These key words may be found in your readings, in the course syllabus, or in the notes you have taken in class. Research topics are always related to, but not necessarily directly the same as topics you have looked at in class.

Step Three: Ask, what are the questions associated with these key words?

Once you have made an ideas map of the issues and key words, what are some of the questions that you may have about these words? Make a list of questions you might want to ask that make sense of these issues. Remember, there is no such thing as a stupid question. For example, if you have listed “grass-roots democracy” as one of your key ideas, you may want to ask the question “What is grass-roots democracy?” You might have to start your research by looking up definitions of this term.

Step Four: Narrow Your Focus.

You will not be able to answer all the questions that you have derived from your key words. That is because the professor has deliberately made the topic broad enough that each student can focus on a

different area of research. So, how do you choose which question (questions) to answer? There are three criteria that you should use in framing your research question:

1. Personal interest: is this a question that you would like to know the answer to?
2. Researchable topic: can you find information in the library on this topic?
3. Manageable data: are the library sources in the tens, the hundreds or the thousands?

Step Six: Look at Some Models

Doing research is all about asking questions and looking for answers. However, if your questions are too broad, you will find it difficult to find specific readings to answer them. Here are some examples of topics that have been assigned in the past by some professors at Huron. As they stand, they are too broad to be manageable or researchable. Here are some ways that you can narrow them down:

1. Example History topic: Is exploitation of workers necessary for successful industrialization?

There are a number of things you might do to narrow down this very broad topic to make it researchable. You could start by using the six “Wh” questions: where/when/what/why/who/ how?

- a. When (which period of history) am I looking at?
- b. Where did the industrialization take place?
- c. What kind of exploitation are we talking about? What do we mean by exploitation?
- d. Why would exploitation help industrialization? Were there instances when it didn't work?
- e. Who was exploiting? Who was exploited?
- f. How do we know that industrialization was successful?

Those are a lot of questions. From these questions you could narrow down to one question that specifies time, place and people.

Possible research question: Was there exploitation of the workers in Britain in the nineteenth century?

Here are some other questions you could ask:

- g. What are the causes of exploitation of workers in industrialized Britain?
- h. What are the effects of exploitation of workers in industrialized Britain?
- i. Is it possible to compare the success of one industry where workers are exploited with the success of another industry where workers were not exploited?

By narrowing down your broad topic, you may find that it is much easier to find specific readings for your research. While you are reading, there are some other questions that you could look for the answers to, and which might help you write the essay from the research: Which industries? Where were they in Britain? Which period in the Industrial Revolution?

2. Example Political Science topic: The European Union has mainly been a success as an international organization.

This question is far too big to be manageable and there would be so much research available that it would be impossible to select from it all. Try narrowing it down with our 6 “wh” questions:

- a. What is the European Union? What is its purpose?
- b. When was it formed? What time period can I examine for “success”?
- c. Who belongs to it?
- d. Where are the headquarters? Where are the countries that belong to it?
- e. Why was it formed?
- f. How do we know it is successful?
- g. Which events signal its success or its failure?

These questions can lead you to a much more focused research question that is both manageable and researchable. For example:

Possible Research Question: What was the original mandate of the EU and what have been the effects of EU activities since 2010?

This research question will help you find specific information that you might be able to use in your essay.

Step Six: Remember, You are not alone!

There are many people who are qualified to help you navigate through the research process if you find that you are stuck!

- Your Professor has office hours when he/she will be glad to discuss your essay topic, research, and focus with you.
- The librarians at the Reserve Desk and the Circulation Desk will be happy to help you find sources for your topic.
- The Writing Assistants on the Mezzanine of the library are trained to help you think critically about the research you have done and incorporate it into the writing assignment.