

Picking a Topic is Research

Brought to you by the University of Houston Libraries

Your professor has just assigned a research paper and you get to choose the topic you will research and write about. But just how do you go about choosing a research topic?

You may think writing a research paper is a straight-line path: You need to pick a topic right away and stick with it. Then you can move on to finding sources and reading through them. And once you have all your sources, you can start writing your paper.

But the research and writing process is a lot messier than that! Choosing your topic is intertwined with finding and reading sources and writing and editing your paper.

Choosing a topic is research.

When you first pick a research topic, it isn't set in stone. It's just an idea that you learn more about with some exploratory research. This initial research might make you want to continue to learn about this topic, inspire new questions, or take you in an entirely new direction with a new topic.

That's OK.

The whole point of exploratory research is to help you refine, tweak, and solidify a research topic that is interesting (to you and others), meaningful, and academically engaging. A bonus is that as you explore information, you may find that you have enough sources to start writing and editing your paper. Even then, as you're writing, you may find that you need to pull in additional pieces of information and you may return to researching. This is a circular or iterative model of research and writing.

So, let's try going through an example topic using this research and model.

Let's say you pick a topic that is interesting to you: the reality TV show *The Bachelor*. As you test the topic with some Internet research and in article databases, you discover that there is lots written about it in the popular press, but not much scholarly research, which is what your professor requires.

Realizing that maybe your topic is a bit too narrowly defined, you decide to tweak it by broadening the scope to "Reality TV" in general. But when you test this new topic, you wind up drowning in a sea of research all of which has to do with Reality TV, but doesn't tie together to form a coherent thesis.

At this point, you might wonder if there's a happy medium between *The Bachelor*, which is too narrow a topic, and "Reality TV" which is too broad.

Since *The Bachelor* is just one of several reality TV shows about dating and romance, perhaps there's more written about this sub-genre. Testing this topic--dating and reality TV-- in some of the library's research databases yields a more promising and manageable number of results.

By following this process of using research to refine a topic, you are able to avoid realizing too late that your topic is un-researchable or drowning in a sea of research from a topic that is too broad in scope. It is important to build in the time to explore and tweak your topic, so that you can take an idea and shape it into a topic that you still find interesting and can realistically use for a research assignment.

For more help choosing a topic or conducting exploratory research, contact the UH Libraries.

Video adapted from North Carolina State University Libraries' Picking Your Topic IS Research video: https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/tutorials/picking_topic