

Research Concepts & Practice

Preliminary Reading

Investing a relatively small amount of time at the beginning of the research process will ultimately prevent hours of frustration. According to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*:

“Preliminary reading is essential as you evaluate and refine your topic.”

Evaluating:

- Is information on my topic readily available?
- Is the information scholarly enough for academic use?
- Will this topic continue to hold my interest?

Refining:

- What specific aspects of my topic appeal to me? Which do not?
- How are others writers and researchers exploring this topic?
- What background information on my topic is relevant/interesting/new to me?

Here are some examples of preliminary reading activities.

- **Finding and reading a brief overview of your topic on Wikipedia, About.com or another Web encyclopedia.** If you like the content, pay attention the References section. This is where you will often find published books and articles on your topic. You know, stuff you can actually use in a college-level paper?
- **Finding and reading an overview of your topic in an encyclopedia found in the library, or through one of the library databases.** Unlike Wikipedia and many other Web sources, articles found in and through the library can not only be used to familiarize yourself with your topic, but can actually be cited within your bibliography.
- **Scanning books about your topic.** What kinds of books are being written about your topic? Often you can access the Table of Contents, giving you an even more specific idea of how some of the titles treat your topic.
- **Scanning journal, magazine or newspaper article titles on your topic.** Using databases like Gale or EBSCO can give you an idea of how thoroughly your topic is treated in published, academically appropriate sources.

Guiding Research Questions & Thesis Statements

Researchers can (and do) spend their lives exploring topics. They publish journal articles and books, lead studies, present at conferences, teach classes, etc. As a student, you don't have a lifetime to devote to your topic and you probably won't be publishing a book. Rather, you will have just a few weeks, and your end product will likely be something along the lines of a 6 to 10 page research paper or a 5 to 8 minute speech.

Therefore, once you identify an interesting, assignment-appropriate topic you need to find a manageable focus for your work. Focusing involves clearly defining the *specific aspect* of the topic you will explore, and formulating a **guiding research question** that captures the main idea of your research. In short: what are you trying to figure out?

When deciding upon your focus, pay attention to the parameters of the assignment: how long is the finished product supposed to be? What can you reasonably cover in that length? Is your task to inform your audience about an issue, to argue a certain point of view, or to attempt to solve a problem?

Focusing Tips

- **Go back to “why” you chose your topic.** Sometimes articulating the “why” out loud will directly reveal the direction you want to go. What made you choose your topic in the first place?
- **Preliminary Reading.** Find some short articles on your topic in encyclopedias, magazines, newspapers, or on the Web. Pay attention to how other researchers and authors are examining your topic. What grabs you? What doesn't?
- **Talk to others about your topic.** Check in not only with your professors and librarians, but talk to your friends, family and classmates about your topic. Having your topic reflected by someone else can often spark great ideas, and any chance to articulate your topic “out loud” is beneficial.

Guiding Research Question vs. the Thesis Statement

If you think of your focus as a single, overriding question guiding the exploration of your topic, you can think of your thesis statement as an answer to that question. Your thesis will be a sentence that defines your point of view on your topic. A solid thesis will not only define your point of view, but will also briefly outline your arguments in terms of why you have arrived at that point of view.

You will develop your thesis after you've found your focus, performed some preliminary research on your topic, and come to a personal conclusion about how you feel about your topic and the specific arguments you will use to persuade your reader to this point of view. So relax. The thesis comes later!

Examples: From Topics to Guiding Questions to Thesis Statements

Broad Topic: Zombies

Guiding Question: What is the allure of zombies in American popular culture?

Thesis: Zombies are a huge part of the current American zeitgeist because they are a physical (and fanciful) embodiment of our post 9/11 fears.

Broad Topic: Teen drug use

Focused Topic: Are reality-based drug awareness programs any more effective than a “just say no” approach?

Thesis: An abstinence-based “just say no” approach to drug prevention is ineffective for most media-savvy Millennials, and a much more effective approach is to accept that many young people will experiment with drugs and will best be served by receiving honest, accurate information from authority figures.

Developing Supporting Research Questions

Think of your supporting research questions as a grocery list designed to guide you through a huge “storehouse” of information. This list will allow you to efficiently locate and retrieve the most relevant knowledge possible to support your thesis, prevent you from getting off track as you sift through large quantities of information, and even help keep you organized as you begin writing. Below are some tips on developing good research questions.

1. **Start simply.** You may not know a lot about your topic, so it is okay to start by asking a few basic questions to launch the research process.

Example: What is a factory farm?
 Why are people so upset about factory farms?
 What are the good points about factory farms?

2. **Continue your preliminary reading.** Look up your topic in reference books and background databases. Looking at what kinds of questions authors are answering about your topic is a great way to get ideas on what questions you should be asking! Are they defining your topic? Providing a history of your topic? Discussing the pros and cons of your topic?

3. **Brainstorm more questions.** Using what you learned from your background research, come up with some more questions. Think of both **defining** questions and **analytical** questions.

Examples of **Defining** Questions:

- What is _____?
- Why is _____ an important issue?
- What background information is necessary to understand _____?
- What are the different types of _____?

Examples of **Analytical** Questions:

- What are the causes of _____
- What are the effects of _____
- What are the “pro” arguments about _____
- What are the “con” arguments about _____
- What is being done about _____

4. **Organize your questions into a logical progression.** Your research questions serve a dual purpose. Not only do they guide your research, but they can be used to outline the “flow” of your paper. Begin by defining your topic and providing background information, and then delve into the analysis.

Example: What is factory farming?
 Why is factory farming a controversial issue?
 What is the history of this issue?
 What are the positive effects of this type of farming?
 What are the negative effects of this type of farming?

5. **Make your final question one of self-discovery.** Your instructors don’t want you to merely *report* on your topic; they want you to spend time reflecting on your research and coming to your own conclusions. It is essential to let them know you’ve done this.

Example: Based on my research, what do I ultimately think about the issue of factory farming and why?