RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
Finding a Focus: Thesis Statements & Questions

Once you identify a topic appropriate to the assignment, able to sustain your interest, and adequately represented in terms of quantity and quality of sources, your next task is to focus your research. This involves clearly defining the *specific aspect* of the topic you will explore. This defining process is essential, as people can (and do) spend their entire lives researching and publishing on topics...you only have three to six weeks, 6 to 10 pages, or 5 to 8 minutes! If you don’t focus, you may very well end up wasting time examining information that will ultimately be of little relevance to your final product. **A thesis will keep you focused, and ultimately save you time.**

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? Is your task to inform your audience about an issue, to argue a certain point of view, or to attempt to solve a problem?

**Some sample theses:**

Broad Topic: Factory farming
Focused Topic: What are the economic benefits of large-scale farming, and do they outweigh the negative effects?

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

Broad Topic: Marijuana
Focused Topic: What are the economic implications of legalizing marijuana for recreational use in California?

Broad Topic: Recycling
Focused Topic: Is curbside recycling simply a stopgap measure that lets big business and industry off the hook?

Broad Topic: Children and Music
Focused Topic: How does exposure to music affect children before they are born and as they develop?

Broad Topic: Immigration
Focused Topic: What are the economic effects of migrant workers on the California economy?

**How to focus?**

- **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?

- **Pay attention to the aspects of your topic others are exploring.** While you are performing your preliminary reading, 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.
Developing Research Questions

Think of your 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?  
   ...  
   What are the negative effects of factory farming?

2. **Perform background research.** Expand on your preliminary reading. Look up your topic in reference books, *CQ Researcher*, and *Facts.com*. Getting some basic background information on your topic may help you decide what you want to focus on in your paper. Background research also helps you identify search terms. The information you find in background sources may answer some of those initial questions, as well as give you ideas on how to expand your list.

3. **Brainstorm more questions.** Using what you learned from your initial 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 ultimate think about the issue of factory farming.  
   Why?
Brainstorming Search Terms

Once you have formulated some preliminary research questions, you can begin to search for answers. You will be looking for these answers in books, magazines, journals, newspapers, research reports, government documents, and other information sources.

Some search tools use a controlled vocabulary – established subject headings or descriptors. Others offer keyword searching – words drawn from the full text of articles. Some tools allow for both controlled and keyword searching. Whatever kind of tool you use – and whatever kind of search you perform -- you will save time and effort by generating a list of good search terms before embarking on your research. Like your list of research questions, you can expect this list to keep growing. Here are some strategies to help with this task.

I. Break down your focused topic and identify the main concepts involved.

Sample Focused Topic: What are the benefits of factory farming, and do they outweigh the negative effects?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept one</th>
<th>Factory farming</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concept two</td>
<td>Positive effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concept three</td>
<td>Negative effects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. Brainstorm synonyms for each concept.

When brainstorming synonyms, think about how other people might describe these concepts. What words would a reporter use? How about a scientist or doctor? Often using more scholarly terms will retrieve more scholarly resources. Think of exact synonyms, as well as slightly narrower (more specific) or broader (more general) terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factory farming</th>
<th>factory farming; factory farms; large-scale farming; farming; farms; agriculture; agricultural industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive effects</td>
<td>positive effects; economic effects; economic benefits; pluses; low prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative effects</td>
<td>negative effects; environmental effects; health effects; animal cruelty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. Identify official subject headings and descriptors

Subject headings, which use a standardized or “controlled” vocabulary, usually give you more specific resources on your topic than a keyword search. This direct path to relevant resources can save you time because it prevents you from having to sift through lots of irrelevant information. A good example of a controlled vocabulary is the Library of Congress Subject Headings list.

How can you do this? You have several options:

1. Talk to a research librarian.
2. Perform a keyword search on your local library catalog. Find a relevant title, then examine the “record” of that title to identify the LC subject heading(s) are attached to it.
3. Perform a keyword search on a major database such as Gale or Ebsco. Find a relevant article, then examine the record of that article to identify the descriptor.

Sample Focused Topic: Do the positive economic benefits of factory farming outweigh the negative environmental effects and ethical aspects?

Sample LC Subject Headings:
factory farms – environmental aspects; factory farms – health aspects
factory farms – moral and ethical aspects; Animal welfare; animal waste – environmental aspects; meat industry and trade – environmental aspects; animal industry – United States.