

Establishing a Research Question

APSU Writing Center Handout

Narrowing a Topic

Narrowing your topic is a crucial step in clarifying your focus and objectives when writing or conducting research. One of the most effective ways to do this is by developing a specific research question that guides your inquiry.

1. Start with a Broad Topic

- Begin by identifying a general area of interest. This broad topic serves as the foundation for your research.
- **Example:** The History of Nursing

Consider:

- Why does this topic matter to you?
- Why should your audience care?
- What aspect of the topic feels especially relevant today?

2. Generate Subcategories

- Next, create subcategories or focused areas within your broad topic. Try free writing or brainstorming to uncover specific aspects that capture your interest.

Examples:

- Florence Nightingale's influence on modern nursing practices
- The evolution of nursing education from the 19th century to today

- The impact of World Wars I and II on the nursing profession

3. Gather Background Information

- Conduct preliminary research to better understand your subtopic. This may include reading articles, books, or credible websites.
- Use reliable academic sources such as the APSU Woodward Library's online databases:
<https://library.apsu.edu/>

4. Formulate Research Questions

- Once you've explored your subtopics, begin crafting specific research questions that focus your investigation.

Consider:

- Which aspects would most interest your audience?
- How do these aspects connect to current issues or discussions?

Examples:

- How did Florence Nightingale's contributions reshape healthcare practices in the 19th century?
- How has nursing education evolved over time, and what impact has that had on the profession?
- In what ways did World Wars I and II expand the roles and responsibilities of nurses?

5. Select the Most Engaging Question

- Review your list of potential research questions and choose the one that:
- Interests you most
- Meets your assignment requirements
- Allows for in-depth analysis rather than a simple yes or no answer

6. Refine Your Focus

- As you develop your research question, think about the following:
- How can I break my topic into smaller, manageable parts?
- What research methods and sources will best support my work?
- How can multiple perspectives deepen my understanding?
- What time period, group, or setting should I focus on to keep my topic manageable?
- Am I avoiding narrowing the topic too much?

7. Evaluate Your Research Question

Before finalizing your question, ask yourself:

- Is my question clear, specific, and researchable?
- Does it go beyond a yes/no answer to allow deeper analysis?
- Why does this question matter, and what debates or challenges surround it?
- Are there areas of the general topic I could expand on to strengthen my argument?

8. Explore Possible Answers

With your focused question in hand, begin exploring possible answers through further research and analysis. Look for evidence and different viewpoints to shape your argument.

References

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