

SELECTION OF TOPIC FOR RESEARCH

FACTORS AFFECTING THE SELECTION

- Personal interest of the researcher
- Motive for research
- Requirement on the part of employer/ funding agency etc
- Financial resources
- Time period
- Availability of literature and other facilities
- Methods of researching
- Availability of qualified supervisor
- Social support

THE PROCESS OF TOPIC SELECTION

Starting Points

- The first step of the research process is the selection of a research topic (problem).
- Selecting a topic is more difficult than it at first seems.
- It requires clear thinking and at times the discarding of favorite ideas and pet topics for more interesting and focused ideas.
- With limited time at one's disposal, there is a temptation to select a topic before the groundwork has been done, but there is need to try to resist the temptation.
- Prepare well and it will save time later.
- Thorough discussions and inquiries will help to select a topic which:
 - Is likely to be of interest
 - Stands a good chance of completion
 - Will be worth the effort, and
 - May have even some practical application later on
- The topic selection step involves:
 - Thinking, sorting and making decisions
 - Clarifying the issues
 - Narrowing focus of concern

Thinking, Sorting and Making Decisions

- You may be:
 - Given a topic to research
 - Asked to select a topic from a list
 - Asked to decide on a topic yourself
- You may have ideas on a particular area of interest that you would like to explore, so draw up a 'first thoughts' list of topics.
- If can't think of a short list of topic, consult
 - newspapers because news reports often raise questions for research, contain a lot of facts about patterns in society but often they are less clear and may prompt to ask questions of interest for research
 - colleagues/ fellow students/ practitioners may point out a policy issue or a project or other useful contacts etc
 - secondary data sources, books, journals etc
- May decide on a short list of two topics
 - Select your first choice and keep the second in mind in case your first choice proves to be too difficult or too uninteresting.
- Selection will be influenced by
 - discussions and reading
 - thinking about possible outcomes
 - deciding particular emphasis of study
 - any other factor
- The outcome should be a working title about the topic.

Clarifying the Issues

- So far, we have been thinking about a topic in general terms. But now we need to start the process of explicitly identifying the issues about a topic, trying out ideas and asking our-self questions.
- There are no rules or recipes to this end and this skill is best learnt by practice.
- However, following approach may be tried:
 - Produce a chart of ideas, possible problems or anything relevant one can think

- For example, write the working title of your chosen topic in the middle of a sheet of paper and link to it all the ideas, doubts, questions etc one can think of; brain storm it; insert arrows, if needed, to link one idea or query with another.
- One may start by using general questions like:
 - What is the purpose of study?
 - What are the major issues'?
 - Is one thing affecting, causing or producing a change in something else?
 - Why is this so'?
 - How information on a specific aspect will be obtained'? Etc.
- Such a brain storming and asking these types of questions will help isolate issues of real importance or interest.
- It doesn't matter how illegible and disorganized your chart is as long as you can read your own writing. This first shot is for the researcher, not for other people.
- A second attempt can then be made which will be far more focused.
- Such an exercise is going:
 - To help clarify thoughts and to try to decide what is actually meant by each statement or even words
 - To give ideas about refining the topic so that one will not be attempting to do research into everything there is to know about a topic, but into a specific aspect or aspects of a topic.
 - To give clues as to whether a topic is likely to be too complex to complete in given time or whether it might prove impossible because of the need to have confidential data which in all probability would be refused.
- The outcome of this step will be to draw together the various items on your first and second thoughts 'charts' into a list of possible questions surrounding the topic.

Getting Focused- Narrowing the Topic

- Select the precise focus of study by:
 - critically examining the list of questions and deleting those which do not relate to the topic
 - selecting the most relevant questions for detailed examination

FACTORS WHICH CAN HELP NARROWING THE FOCUS OF STUDY TOPIC

Examine the Literature

- Published articles are particularly an excellent source of ideas for research questions. They are usually at an appropriate level of specificity and suggest research questions that focus on the following:
 - Replicate a previous research with variations
 - Explore unexpected findings discovered in previous research
 - Follow suggestions an author gives for future research at the end of an article
 - Challenge findings or attempt to refute a relationship

Talk Over Ideas with Others

- Ask people who are knowledgeable about the topic for questions about it that they have thought of
- Seek out those who hold opinions that differ from yours on the topic and discuss possible research questions with them
- Other people may be aware of sensitive aspects of certain topics which could cause difficulties at some stage or they may know of other people who have carried out research in one or more of your topics who would like to talk to you.

Apply To a Specific Context

- May focus the topic onto a specific historical period or time period
- Narrow the topic to a specific society in geographic unit
- Consider which sub-groups or categories of people/units are involved and whether there are differences among them

Consider Practical Limitations

- Major limitations include time, cost, access of resources, ethical concerns, expertise of researcher etc
- Experienced researchers are the best sources of good estimates

Thinking and Rethinking

- Thinking and rethinking process results in a more specific formulation of research problem/question

Re-Phrasing

- Re-phrasing research problem so as to make it operationally viable and analytically meaningful
- Clearly define the research problem/question and put it in as specific terms as possible

TENTATIVE OUTLINE OF RESEARCH

- Draw up an initial research project outline comprising of the following:
 - Clear purpose and focus of study
 - Key questions
 - Nature/type of information that might be needed in order to be in a position to answer questions (not precisely and more work will be needed but start has been made)
 - Tentative ideas about ways and means of obtaining the information
 - Possible type of literature to be studied
- Devise a time table to check how much time each stage of research will take:
 - There is never enough time to do all the work that seems to be essential in order to do a thorough job. But somehow the work has to be completed in the specified time.
 - Generally it is unlikely to keep rigidly to a time table. But some attempt should be made to develop a schedule so that progress can be checked periodically, and, where necessary, force oneself to move from one stage of research to the next--- a discipline that has to be learnt!

CONSULTATION WITH SUPERVISOR

- Keep in touch with your supervisor

- If you are held up on any stage, ask for help and advice before spending too much time on your own
- Consult your supervisor for finalization of topic
- From the start of your research, get into the habit of writing everything down, and
- Don't throw away your drafts until your research project has been submitted and assessed.