

FINDING A RESEARCH QUESTION

Research is looping, messy, and unpredictable. You can manage it with a plan, as long as you are prepared to depart from it. The first step in that plan is one you cannot put off: to find a good research question. As you look for the question that will ground your project, keep in mind the following points:

1. **Value surprise and disagreement.** Look for ideas, claims, facts, or anything that makes you think, *Wow, I didn't know that!* or *How can that be true?* Not only will those matters hold your attention longer, but they will make it easier to get the attention of your readers.
2. **Make your topic manageable.** Think about your topic in the context of something you know or care about and that is also likely to matter to others.
3. **Watch out for Wikipedia.** When you need information quickly, Wikipedia can be a godsend. It covers almost every topic you can think of, and studies show that it is generally reliable. But it is usually incomplete, and it does have errors, sometimes outrageous ones. Feel free to use Wikipedia for ideas or citations to pursue. But unless your instructor says it is okay, do not use it for information you must cite.
4. **Question your topic.** A topic is only as good as the questions it raises. So make a list of all the questions that you can imagine asking about your topic, then choose the most interesting among them.
5. **Bounce ideas off friends.** Ask your friends for their ideas about your topic. They may have ideas that are interesting but in your view wrong, that are in your view right but not properly developed, or that just plain surprise you. If so, plug their ideas into the appropriate formula and you have a candidate for a worthy research question.
6. **Evaluate your questions.** Finally, evaluate your questions and scrap those unlikely to yield interesting answers.

Here are some signs of a question you can't use:

1. You can answer the question too easily.
2. No one can plausibly *disprove* the answer, because it seems self-evident or obvious.
3. You can't find factual evidence to support the answer.
4. You would find so many sources that you cannot look at most of them.

The crucial point is to find a question that *you* really want to answer. Too many students, even advanced ones, think that education means memorizing the right answers to questions someone else has asked and answered. It is not. Among your most important goals for your education should be to learn to ask your own questions and find your own answers.