Selecting a Research Topic

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Research “Cycle”: Ideal

(1) Develop topic

(2) Locate resources

(3) Interpret & Evaluate information

(4) Apply information & Cite sources
The research process is iterative; it’s okay to adjust your topic as you go and to do these steps non-sequentially, as long as all steps are completed. Developing a strong topic after some initial searching helps minimize the overlap.
Developing a Research Topic

Keep these key elements in mind:

• **Interest** (choose something you’ll enjoy researching!)
• **Scope** (breadth and depth of a topic)
• **Time** (pick something you can successfully address in the given time constraints/due dates)
• **Clarity** (know what you’re looking for; refine/adjust as needed)
• **Assignment** (follow directions from your professor on topic & paper requirements!)
Steps to Refining a Research Topic

Use these strategies to come up with a research topic

1. Background Reading (For an overview of the topic, this will help you realize the scope)
2. Narrow/Adapt Topic (Is there enough information on your topic? Too little?)
3. Retrospective Research (Explore the topic in-depth, for a historical perspective)
4. Contemporary Research (Look at current issues)

Adapted from CSU Libraries “Topic Selection Tips” by Naomi Lederer
http://lib.colostate.edu/howto/toptip.html
1. Background Reading

- Get an overview of your topic
- Encyclopedias (aka Wikipedia) for basic information and major concepts.
- Textbooks, instructor’s lectures, professional organizations, etc.

Developing a topic involves lots of skimming! Be sure to keep track of potentially useful sources as you develop your topic.
2. Narrow/Adapt Topic

• Locate key terms, subject headings
• Look for “related articles”
• Search a few databases for your topic. Finding too many hits? You need to narrow. Not enough? “Zoom out”/broaden your topic.

• Examples:
  ▫ “How many unplanned pregnancies in community college students in Ohio are prevented when birth control methods are promoted via Twitter?” ➔ likely, this is too narrow
  ▫ “Birth control promotion” ➔ probably too broad
2. Narrow/Adapt Topic

Possible ways to narrow your topic:

- **Geography** (Does location matter? Country, neighborhood, rural vs. urban, etc.)
- **Population** (Limit by age, occupation, sex, species, ethnic group, etc.)
- **Time** (Pre- or Post- WiFi on airplanes? Certain decade? This might not be as much of a factor with emerging technologies.)
- **Aspect** (Focus on one piece of a topic i.e. “automated text-message appointment reminders” instead of “mobile phones and health care”)

If you’re restricting by too many of these factors and not finding anything, try removing one or more to broaden the search and locate usable information.
3. Retrospective Search

Useful for in-depth papers:

- Seminal articles/papers/books/research on the topic?
- Big names studying this topic?
- When did it first appear?
- “Historical view”
4. Contemporary Search

For current information & perspectives on the topic:

- Current issues, “in the news” (blog posts?)
- New applications of a product/technology?
- How is a service being implemented?
- Updated regulations/legislation regarding topic?
- Recent studies? Conference proceedings? Reports? (Grey literature useful for current information)
Sample Topic Selection (*Simplified)

Assignment: Create an annotated bibliography on a topic within “health informatics.”

Step 1: Background information.
• Search Wikipedia for “health informatics”. Skim entry. “eHealth” catches my eye as a related concept.
• Read the Wikipedia entry for eHealth. “mHealth” is mentioned.
• Read Wikipedia’s “mHealth” entry.
Sample Topic Selection (*Simplified)

Assignment: *Create an annotated bibliography on a topic within “health informatics.”*

**Step 2: Narrow/Adapt Topic.**

- mHealth and remote monitoring → mobile apps monitoring health → Current barriers to using mobile apps by clinicians and patients to remotely monitor chronic diseases
- Search in databases during each phase to ensure relevant results & information availability
Sample Topic Selection (*Simplified)

Topic: *Current barriers to using mobile apps by clinicians and patients to remotely monitor chronic diseases*

**Step 3: Retrospective Search.**
- First mobile app approved for use?
- Big companies?
- Technology (sensors, etc.)? (Availability?)
- Mobile phone usage/stats might be useful too.
Sample Topic Selection (*Simplified)

Topic: *Current barriers to using mobile apps by clinicians and patients to remotely monitor chronic diseases*

**Step 4: Contemporary Search.**
- Health insurance compliance/coverage as a factor?
- Current cost/cost-effectiveness? Usage?
- Technology (sensors, etc.)? (Availability? Users-adaptations of clinicians vs. patients?)
- Mobile phone usage statistics?
Sample Topic Selection (*Simplified)

Topic: *Current barriers to using mobile apps by clinicians and patients to remotely monitor chronic diseases*

We have a focused topic and we know the information we are looking for.

Other aspects to this topic might include:
- Government regulation/laws
- Specific populations (older vs. young adults)
- Accuracy of devices
- Geography-specific (US only, urban vs. rural, etc.)
- Condition-specific (diabetes, asthma, etc.)