

## Discovering a Topic for Research

One of the most important parts of doing a research report is choosing a topic. By choosing wisely, you can ensure that your research will go smoothly and that you will enjoy doing it.

### Choosing a Subject That You Care About

A **subject** is a broad area of interest, such as African-American history or animal behavior. One way to approach the search for a research-report topic is first to choose a general area of interest and then to focus on some part of it. Make sure that you have a real reason for wanting to explore the subject. Often the best subjects for research reports are ones that are related to your own life or to the lives of people you know.

If you are already keeping a “writing ideas” list in your journal or in your writing portfolio, you can refer to that list for possible subjects. If you are not regularly listing your writing ideas, you might consider starting to do so now.

You can begin exploring general subject areas that interest you by completing the following interest inventory.

#### ***Interest Inventory***

*Respond in writing to the following questions:*

1. What subjects do I enjoy reading about?
2. What topics that I have recently read about in magazines or seen on television would I like to know more about?



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### ***Interest Inventory (cont.)***

3. What books have I enjoyed reading in the past?
4. What subjects have captured my attention and interest in my classes?
5. What issues do I feel strongly about?
6. What kind of topic do I want to write about—an event, a person, or an idea?
7. What interesting careers or hobbies do my friends, acquaintances, and relatives have? What interesting experiences have they had?
8. If I could have a long conversation with someone from any place and from any time in history, who would that person be?
9. What do I wonder about? What aspects of my world would I like to know the origins or history of?

If your answers to the interest-inventory questions don't suggest a general subject area that you would like to learn more about, try the following activities.

### ***Searching for a Subject***

1. Spend some time in a library, simply walking up and down the aisles or browsing through the catalog, looking for subjects that appeal to you.
2. Browse through encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, dictionaries, or recent periodical indexes. Useful indexes include the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and *Historical Abstracts*.

### ***Searching for a Subject (cont.)***

3. If your school or library has any books with lists of ideas for research reports, look through these.
4. Glance at the tables of contents in your textbooks, looking for subjects that you'd like to know more about.
5. If you have access to an electronic encyclopedia, a knowledge database, or a computer index that covers general subjects, start with an interesting search word and see where that leads. If you have access to the Internet, you could try browsing the World Wide Web for topics that interest you.
6. Watch public-television specials, or listen to public-radio programs. See if any of the subjects of the programs capture your imagination.
7. Look through newsmagazines for subjects related to current events.
8. List some novels that you have read or films that you have seen, and think about possible subjects related to these.

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### ***Limiting Your Subject/Choosing a Topic***

Once you have a **general subject** that you are interested in, such as endangered species or civil rights, the next step is to narrow that subject to a **specific topic** that can be treated in a research report.

### ***Doing Preliminary Research***

If you already know a great deal about your subject, then you can probably think of a specific topic to research in that

subject area. However, if you are not already an expert, it is a good idea to do some preliminary research to identify potential topics. Here are a few suggestions for preliminary research.

### ***Ideas for Preliminary Research***

- Read encyclopedia articles.
- List questions about the subject, and interview someone knowledgeable about it.
- Brainstorm with friends, classmates, or relatives to find out what they know about the subject.
- Check the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* to find general articles on your subject.
- Find a textbook that covers the general field of study to which your subject belongs. Read about your subject in that textbook.
- Go to the place in the library where books on the subject are shelved. Choose books at random and look them over.

Here is how one student conducted her preliminary research.

#### ***One Student's Process: Jenny***

In searching for a subject for her research report, Jenny watched a television program about wars the United States had been involved in. She knew quite a bit about the Civil War already, because her brother was really interested in it and her family had visited many battle sites on their vacations. She had also heard a lot about World War II from her grandfather and about the Vietnam War from her father and her uncles. She knew hardly anything about the War of 1812, though. She wondered what the program's description of the war as the "second war for independence" meant. She decided to find out.

## Using Prewriting Techniques

In addition to conducting preliminary research, you may want to use one of the following prewriting techniques to help you come up with a specific topic:

- 1. Freewriting or clustering.** Write whatever comes to mind about the subject for five minutes, or draw a cluster diagram in which you use lines to connect your subject with related ideas.
- 2. Brainstorming.** Working with a group of friends or classmates, write down a list of topics that come to mind as people think about the subject.
- 3. Questioning.** Write a list of questions about the subject. Begin each question with the word *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, or *how*, or start your questions with *What if* . . .
- 4. Discussing.** Listen to what other students know about your subject, what interests them about it, and what problems they think you might have in researching it.

## Evaluating Possible Topics

Once you have come up with a list of ideas for possible topics, you need to evaluate them—that is, you need to judge them on the basis of certain criteria. Here are some criteria for judging a research topic:

**1. The topic should be interesting.** Often the most interesting topic is one that is related to your family's history, to your future, to your major goals, to the place where you live or would like to live, to a career that interests you, or to a hobby or other activity that you enjoy. The topic might be something that has caught your interest in the past, perhaps something you have read about or have studied in school.

**2. The topic should be covered in readily available sources.** When considering a topic, always check the catalogs of a few local libraries and the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* to see if sources are available.

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**3. The topic should be significant.** Choose a topic that is significant for you, one worth your time and energy.

**4. The topic should be objective.** Make sure that you will be able to gather enough facts about the topic to support your argument.

**5. You should not simply repeat material available in other sources.** You should look for a topic that allows you to come up with your own angle or approach.

**6. The topic should be narrow enough to be treated fully.** Ask your teacher how many pages long your paper should be, and choose a topic that is narrow enough to be treated in a paper of that length.

## Writing a Statement of Controlling Purpose

Once you have decided on a specific topic, your next step is to write a **statement of controlling purpose**. This is a sentence or pair of sentences that tells what you want to accomplish in your report. It is called a statement of controlling purpose because it controls, or guides, your research. The statement of controlling purpose usually contains one or more keywords that tell what the report is going to accomplish. Keywords that often appear in statements of controlling purpose include *analyze, classify, compare, contrast, define, describe, determine, establish, explain, identify, prove, and support*.

Here are two examples of statements of controlling purpose:

The purpose of this report is to analyze the impact of the use of solar energy on pollution.

The purpose of this report is to contrast the leadership styles of President Harry S. Truman and Premier Joseph Stalin during the period 1945–1952.

To come up with a statement of controlling purpose, you will probably have to do a good deal of preliminary research. That is because before you can write a statement of controlling purpose, you need to know enough about your topic to have a

general idea of what you want to say in your report. Here is an example of one student's process.

### One Student's Process: Jenny

In doing her preliminary research, Jenny realized that she was interested in the big picture of the War of 1812. She decided that to paint this picture for her readers, she would need to give a broad overview of the events that led up to the war, the battles of the war itself, and the effects of the war on the United States. To do this in the small number of pages of her report, she would have to focus on the important issues rather than on small details about individual people and events.

Since she was interested in getting all the important facts about the war, she searched her library's computer catalog for the broad term *War of 1812*. She also used those words as the basis of an Internet search. As she gathered information about the war, she wrote the following statement of controlling purpose: "The purpose of this report is to explain why the War of 1812 was important in the development of the United States and why it is sometimes called the 'second war for independence.'"

Here are some examples of types of controlling purposes:

### **Statements of Controlling Purpose**

*A controlling purpose can involve . . .*

**Supporting (or arguing against) a policy:** The purpose of this paper is to support the policy of limiting nuclear weapons.

**Proving (or disproving) one or more statements of fact:** The purpose of this paper is to prove that by failing to take action against Italy, the League of Nations was partly responsible for that country's takeover of Ethiopia in 1936.

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***Determining the relative values of two or more things:*** The purpose of this paper is to compare land-war tactics and air-war tactics to determine which type of warfare is more effective in a jungle war.

***Analyzing something into its parts and showing how the parts relate to one another:*** The purpose of this paper is to describe the roles of various citizen groups and government agencies in making policies that affect support for the homeless.

***Defining something:*** The purpose of this paper is to define the phrase *freedom of the press* by describing the laws that limit it.

***Explaining causes or effects:*** The purpose of this paper is to explain the causes of the destruction of Brazil's rain forests.

***Establishing a cause-effect relationship:*** The purpose of this paper is to show that increasing state and federal spending on education leads to improved test scores.

***Describing the development of something over time:*** The purpose of this paper is to describe how rock 'n' roll developed from blues, gospel, and country music.

***Identifying and describing a general trend:*** The purpose of this paper is to describe the extinction of South American plant and animal species that is now occurring.

***Classifying items into groups or categories:*** The purpose of this paper is to classify African myths into categories such as creation stories and ancestor stories.

***Relating a part to a whole:*** The purpose of this paper is to examine the Food Stamp Program as part of the federal government's welfare system in the 1970s.

***Comparing or contrasting two things to show how they are similar or different:*** The purpose of this paper is to compare



the actions of the guerrillas in the Pacific theater during World War II with the actions of the Vietcong in the Vietnam War.

***Examining a technique:*** The purpose of this paper is to look at persuasive techniques used in television ads.

***Explaining a general concept by means of specific examples:*** The purpose of this paper is to explain the idea of balance of power by giving examples of it in action.

***Explaining the main idea or message of something:*** The purpose of this paper is to explain the political message of George Orwell's *1984*.

This list of types of controlling purpose is far from complete, so do not worry if the controlling purpose that you come up with does not fall into one of the categories in the list. Remember, though, that your controlling purpose should be one that has meaning for you and your readers.

Your controlling purpose may change as you do your research. When you begin writing your research report, you will replace your statement of controlling purpose with a **thesis statement**, a statement of your main idea. The thesis statement will not contain the phrase "the purpose of this report is." For more information on writing thesis statements, see pages 79–81.