

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 research 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.** You have to carve out of your topic a manageable piece. Try to figure out what others think is important about it and focus on that.
3. **Watch out for Wikipedia.** When you need information quickly, *Wikipedia* can be a godsend. But it is usually incomplete, and it does have errors, sometimes outrageous one. Feel free to use *Wikipedia* for ideas or citations to pursue. But do not use it for information you must cite.
4. **Question your topic.** This is a crucial step. Once you have a topic, question it. Make a list of all the questions that you can imagine answering.
5. **Bounce ideas off friends.** 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. These ideas might help you find 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.