



Research Papers: Pre-Writing Phase

Topic vs. Issue

- A *topic* is a thing or idea an essay can be written about.
- An *issue* is a thing or idea which has sides that can be debated.

What are the issues connected to your topic? What are debatable sides of those issues?

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Is there authoritative or scholarly information on my topic?
- What assumptions do I have about this? Am I willing question them?
- Who are the people that care about this? What is being debated and why?
- Am I genuinely interested in learning about more about this?

Evaluative Criteria for Research Questions:

1. **Focused**, not too broad, not too narrow
2. **Clear**, not vague
3. **Manageable in scope** for assignment
4. **Answer(s) matter(s) to someone** (stakeholder identified)
5. **Can't be answered with "yes/no"**
6. **Requires analysis**, not only opinion

Tips for Revising a Research Question for Specificity

Ask yourself the 5 W's:

1. **Who**—Which specific population will I focus my research on?
2. **What**—Define unclear words, specify what you will measure.
3. **Where**—Specify where you will focus research, if it matters.
4. **When**—Specify timeframe or age of population, if it matters.
5. **Why**—What specific causes and effects do you want to explore?
6. **How**—How will you explore the correlation between two things?

Things to Keep in Mind

- **Do not** give into the temptation to look for information which supports what you *already know*. By definition, this is not research. Finding sources that confirm what you want to say is **harder** than following where real research will lead you.
- If you want to do a research paper on a question you already know the answer to, you will bore yourself and very likely your readers as well. Use research to discover something that engages you and satisfies your curiosity.
- Be sure to analyze how you will use your sources **before** writing.
- The answer to your research question could be your thesis statement!