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Organizing a Research Project

What is research?

The word "research" originates from the medieval French word *rechercher*, meaning "to seek closely." In its most general sense, research involves investigating a topic to learn more about it. Typically, one conducts research to answer questions. Often, as one learns more about a topic, initial questions generate additional questions.

Sometimes the purpose of research is simply to increase one's factual knowledge—for example, learning how to treat a bee sting, or looking up the difference between a hurricane and a cyclone. More often, however, research involves going beyond mere fact-collecting. It requires one to analyze, or interpret, the information gathered and to draw conclusions from it. A research paper thus usually includes a thesis statement that makes a claim about the topic, followed by evidence to make a persuasive argument.

Some important questions before you begin…

- What should you accomplish in your research paper? (Consider your teacher's purpose in assigning the research project. What does s/he hope you will learn about the topic, or about the process of conducting research?) Check the assignment prompt for guidance.
- Should you identify an arguable issue?
- Should you show a range of positions? (Most argument essays benefit from considering—and refuting—counterarguments.)
- How will your topic reflect the concerns of the course?
- Who are you writing for? (Who should be able to understand your paper—your teacher and other students in your class, or a more general audience?)

How to find a research question

If you are conducting a research project for a class, you may already have done some preliminary work toward developing a question simply by participating in class discussions and keeping up with readings and assignments. If not, determine a general topic and read for background in general resources. As you read, make note of what interests you most about the topic. Jot down any questions the reading generates for you. Look for puzzles or silences in the text.

Draw on your notes to develop a research question. Unless the prompt directs you otherwise, your goal is most likely to write about an arguable issue. Thus, avoid questions with non-controversial factual answers (e.g. NOT "How many varieties of penguins live in Antarctica?"), or questions with simple yes or no answers.

A broad question can certainly provide a place to start, but try to narrow it down as you continue your research so that you're ultimately defending a more specific argument. If you are concerned that your topic is too broad, use your initial question to generate more specific ones. For example, the broad question, "why do people wear burqas?", might lead you to more specific questions:

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- Why do people wear burqas?
  - Who wears them?
    - Who says they need to wear them?
      - What happens when they don't wear them? What happens when they do?
  - How do women feel about this? How do men feel about this?
    - Does everyone feel the same about this? How do views differ?
      - Do opinions differ by region, or age, or…?
  - What are the rules about wearing burqas? Have the rules always been the same?
    - Are the rules the same everywhere?
      - How do the rules in Europe compare to the rules in the Middle East?
        - Etc.

Seven strategies for organizing a research project

1. Assemble printed sources and interact with them
   - Select books, scholarly articles, government documents, and popular sources (according to your research question).
   - Skim the sources to evaluate whether or not they are on topic.
   - Use bibliographies of articles and books to track down other sources.
   - Evaluate online sources for quality. (For suggestions on how to do this, see http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/553/04/.)

2. Consider other methods of gathering data
   - Explore other resources for gathering data—such as interviews, surveys, field work, experiments, questionnaires—in accordance with the conventions of the discipline.
   - Use footnotes from sources to discover other sources and follow the shape of the academic conversation.

3. Choose a system for keeping notes
   - Consider Cornell notes or keeping notes on separate index cards.
   - Be sure to write down author/title/call number/page number/url/etc. information so you can recheck information in the source, and so you can cite it appropriately in your paper.
   - Distinguish among paraphrase, summary, and quotation in your notes.
     - A paraphrase restates the original material in your own words and is approximately the same length as the original.
     - A summary gives an overview of the general ideas and is shorter than the original.
     - Quotations contain the exact words of your source and include quotation marks.

4. Use your sources to generate ideas
   - Write about what you read.
   - Identify key terms.
   - Make a list of questions as you read.
   - Look for connections, contradictions, and "silences" among the sources.
   - Determine your main idea(s).

5. Organize your ideas
   - Use an outline, chart, or other map to sketch out the bare bones of your argument.
   - Take a few minutes to freewrite any parts that are proving difficult.

6. Write your paper
   - Develop a working thesis statement.
   - Write your paper, providing evidence in support of your thesis. As you write, you might discover your argument takes a path you didn't originally expect. If so, revise your thesis so that it more accurately reflects your argument.

7. Evaluate your argument
   - Do you have a clear thesis statement in your introduction?
   - Do you support your thesis with clear evidence?
   - Do you provide definitions of key terms?
   - Do you consider counterarguments?
   - Have you returned to your sources for clarification or support, if needed?
   - Have you offered an interpretation of evidence, or merely stated facts about your topic?