

Developing Your Research Project by Paul J. Croce, American Studies, Stetson University
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Even a whole course can hardly cover the whole of that subject; but any one course is designed to give some representative overview. The *research project* has three major goals for students: 1. to learn more about the course's subject area on a topic not yet covered or with another interpretive or factual slant on a subject from our common reading; 2. to discover and use the creative interpretations in published work; and 3. to develop their own interpretations. The authors of works for student research do their research on a large, book-length scale; student researchers learn and interpret subjects on the scale of a paper.

Every good piece of writing begins with a good question. When I was in graduate school, a teacher said: For any topic that you still can't work out by the end of a long night of discussion, write a book about it. That may be going overboard for most of us, but the point he was getting at was that these are topics that are based on large questions, questions that animate you. If that sounds idealistic, take this notion of writing that is driven by your genuine interests as an ideal to shoot for, even as you think about the process of putting a research project together. After all, you are going to be "living with" with the topic for a while, so at least pick something you like to spend time with!

Choice of topic:

Common Readings: start with the course topics and common readings.

What is being covered? What questions emerge from those topics? What are some related topics? For example, in a course that covers the contested elections of 1800 and 2000, what about other contested elections, or other elections that were less contested?

What is not being covered? For example, in a course about military history, what about the wars that receive little attention, or the anti-war movements in response to various military engagements?

Browsing Beyond: "light" reading (browsing) of a range of materials you need or that interest you:

Library: go to the shelves of a topic and let your eyes and mind wander

Computer: follow key words to search various versions of topics

Your Interests: hobbies, vocational possibilities, curiosities, things that bug you

Start with a question: not the last word, but a first grasp of your approach into the subject.

Many will begin with a broad *subject area*, such as Water Shortages, which is so broad that it still needs more focusing.

Your question should at least indicate your *topic* within that subject, such as Pressure on Water Supplies in a particular region, and

Keep learning and thinking about the issues until you start to focus on your *theme*, such as Current Zoning Rules are Increasing the Strains on Our Water Supplies.

=Turn in a brief statement, a paragraph of about a page, that includes your subject area, your topic or range of topics within it, the questions you need to ask, some elaboration of what you mean, where you think you need to look to learn more, and if possible, a preliminary statement of your thematic interpretation.

Sources for Research: There are many types of material to use for pursuit of your questions, and your topic will often dictate which ones to use:

Books are the "top of the writing food chain," meaning that they are written by experts who have gained respect, they are about topics of pressing concern to one audience or more, and they have been reviewed by publishers and fellow experts for quality. Books will generally give you thorough, authoritative accounts, or in the case of fiction, compelling stories about your topic.

Other Writings: examine material related to the subject of the book, in particular, consider each of these:

book reviews of your book: short summaries and judgments

encyclopedia entries: short overviews of subject areas

interviews: first-hand accounts

magazine articles: published primary sources; choose by topic

scholarly journal articles: focused, in-depth analysis; often steps toward books

government documents: policy statements, data, political primary sources
web pages: contact information, wild range of material: the good, the bad, the marketed
audio or visual material: non-verbal primary sources

=Turn in an annotated list of what you are researching in pursuit of your question.

Refining and Revising Research Topics:

The Spiral of research: learn things from your materials, but also ask questions about them.

Together, as your materials and your questions interact, they form a spiral—new material producing more questions; new questions suggesting new material; new material, more question; etc.—as you both dig into the subject and extract your own interpretive point of view about it.

New questions, new sources:

What new questions emerge from your research?

What new research will be needed to answer your new questions?

=Turn in a statement of your topic, evolved.

Updates on Research:

Report to yourself with notes to keep track of ideas, references, even page numbers of where things are (simple to do at the time; saving great frustration later!)

Report to the class, as appropriate, the topic and your thesis about the topic. For many, oral expression can be clarifying: finding words to explain what you are saying can be a great way to sharpen for yourself what indeed you are saying.

=Turn in your update, report it in class, or meet in office hours; include your thesis and how you will explain it.

The Written Research Report:

Drafts: Write out your ideas with the assumption that your wording and even your structure will change, and do this early enough so that you have time to make those changes.

Review the draft to check that you are being as fair to the topic, as persuasive as possible, and as clear as you can be in structure and wording. See the Writing Guides on the American Studies webpage for detailed ways to be your own editor.

Sources: Many students ask, How many should I include? It is impossible to answer this question precisely with application to all papers. However, please be sure to review the list of Sources of Research above, and be sure to include at least six of these, although there may be exceptions that require more or less. How so? Topics that deal with first-person accounts or audio or visual material, for example, require more particular sources; topics that deal with a particular issue that is deeply covered in a few books of primary and secondary sources require relatively fewer total sources (likely after consultation of encyclopedias and book reviews at the beginning of the project).

=Turn in your paper on reused or double-sided paper with a staple. And be proud of your good work!—and this work may itself be a draft of future writing—in another class, in an application, on the job, or even for a publication.