



Finding your topic and your research question

SchreibCenter at the Language Resource Center

Topic – research question and hypothesis – research interest

Topic:

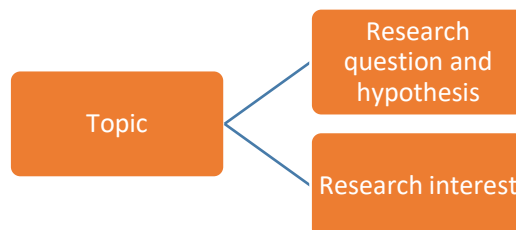
Finding your topic is the first step in the process of scientific writing. You will identify a broad topic based on a class, literature or previous knowledge. After a first review of the literature on that topic, however, you will have to narrow it down. While finding a topic is usually not that hard, narrowing it down often is.

Research question and hypothesis:

Within every field of topics, you need to find your focus. After your first reading of the literature, you can formulate a hypothesis or research question that can be at the core of your work. Hypotheses are ‘statements;’ neither do they contain background information, nor an explanation. Instead, it is important to formulate them very accurately and precisely, so that they can be verified or falsified during the course of your work on the topic. Both the research question and the hypothesis can guide how you choose further literature, how you read this literature, and how you structure your line of arguments.

Research interest:

As you are writing a scientific text, you should be aware of what guides your interest in writing about your topic. It can be helpful to reflect on why you are working on precisely that research question and what goal you want to achieve in answering it.



Based on:

Franck, Norbert (2003): Fit fürs Studium. Erfolgreich reden, lesen, schreiben. München: dtv.

Mehlhorn, Grit (2005): Studienbegleitung für ausländische Studierende an deutschen Hochschulen. München: Iudicium.

Metzig, Werner & Schuster, Martin (2003): Lernen zu lernen. Berlin: Springer.

Developing a research question

Read first, commit later!

First, find out how much and what kind of literature there is on your topic. Only then should you formulate a **specific research question**.

Narrow down your topic as precisely as possible. The following categories may help:

- Temporality: from ... until ..., in the ... century, during the Clinton era
- Geography: in Spain, in northern Germany, in London,
- Institutions: in elementary schools, in museums, in accounting
- Groups: women, men, teenagers, CEOs, college students
- Sources/materials: flyers, children's movies, web ads
- Individuals: in the work of ...
- Disciplines: a linguistic/pedagogical/sociological analysis of the foreign language classroom
- Theoretical approaches, explanatory concepts: a statistical comparison
- Key figures of theoretical approaches: based on Freud

When formulating your research question or hypothesis, consider the following aspects:

- Can you do the amount of work necessary in the time you have for your project?
- Is there actually a specific research question or hypothesis? (Hypotheses work better when you work with measurements, statistics etc.)
- Is there a clear research interest?
- Is the research question clear and logical?
- Is it possible to answer the question with the methods available to you?
- Can you operationalize all the terms in the hypothesis or question) (How can you measure factors such as success/progress/improvement?)
- Research questions with interrogative pronouns such as “why” or “how” imply the use of explorative methods.
- Yes/no-questions usually require a need to be answered clearly and definitively.

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