

Chapter 2 The Writing Process of Academic Research Papers

You are already a writer with long experience in school work at different stages, and yet you suddenly find writing academic research papers so much different from what you are used to. This chapter discusses the writing process of academic research papers with focuses on:

- Develop an Interesting Research Topic
- Keep Research Logs
- Identify an Audience
- Develop Research Questions
- Basic Models to Formulate a Thesis Statement
- Have a Theory
- Write an Outline
- Analyze Data
- Write the First Draft
- Review and Revise

2.1 Develop an Interesting Research Topic

2.1.1 Possible Areas of Inquiry

You probably have already been told that you need to do a lot of reading before settling on an interesting research topic, but you will find it daunting, impossible, unnecessary, or sometimes unproductive to read all the relevant books and articles in your field in order to find a good topic. For veteran scholars or seasoned researchers, research topics are generated, discovered, or developed through their regular reading of academic publications and frequent dialogues with other scholars and researchers. Some of the topics might be problems or concerns arising from their long time classroom teaching, vigilant observations of reality, or

diligent chewing, brewing, and nursing of ideas and theories. For beginning researchers or scholars who need to develop a topic suitable for an assignment, a course, a conference, a seminar, a journal, or a dissertation, they need some strategies that will help them develop a good topic within a limited time frame.

Remembering that writing academic research papers is a way of **joining academic conversations** with members of the discourse community, you will understand that hunting for and discovering an interesting and research-worthy topic is like sifting through the conversations and discussions in the existing scholarship to find out the controversies, gaps, misconceptions, application of already-researched theories or topics, or to discover topics that are under-researched, or to find gaps, misunderstandings, and application in existing research. According to Slade, exploring the following areas of inquiry may help you develop or “discover” your own research topics.

(1) Where **scholars suggest under-discussed areas** of inquiry or unresolved controversies in their own field. This kind of information often **appears in notes**;

(2) Commonly held but **unsubstantiated conclusions** or **new ways of testing the basic assumptions** in a field can provide subjects for research;

(3) Consideration of the terminology in your discipline can yield innovative ways to illustrate it or even new definitions;

(4) **Contradictions** or disjunctions among the various books on a subject also suggest possible topics;

(5) Recently published books/journal articles or development in current events can **afford new insight** into existing theories and thus lead to opportunities for research.

2.1.2 Guidelines for Choosing a Topic

Once you settle on a research topic, you want to know if your research topic is research worthy and acceptable or not. Then use the following criteria to determine its viability:

(1) Your topic must be **sufficiently narrow**. The size and scope of the topic must be manageable in relation to the size and scope of the assignment.

(2) Your topic must be **feasible**. You must have an adequate number of sources available to you. You must have the necessary language or technical skills

to properly use these sources.

(3) Your topic should provide an opportunity to present your own interpretation of the evidence or introduce new evidence in support of an existing interpretation.

(4) Your topic should be capable of generating significant and provocative questions. Identify an issue, idea or problem that offers the promise of specific conclusions.

(5) Your topic should provide information that is appropriate to the purpose of your assignment. Clarify the purpose of your assignment with your instructor.

2.1.3 Strategies on Developing a Research Topic

Oftentimes, scholars, researchers, and graduate student writers need to settle on a good research topic within a limited time frame. Therefore, it is important that academic research writers get knowledgeable on the strategies available and explore around to find the ones most suitable to the specific context of their writing projects.

Normally, authorized journal articles offer the first-hand data about the subject in the field. Browsing journal articles in both English and Chinese databases might be a short cut to find your research topic.

In an online guide to research writing, "Research Is a Cyclical Process," Leslie Martha (2012) recommends the following strategies, which writers could select, modify, and combine to develop their own strategies.

(1) Browse loads of **abstracts** to get a quick sense of the major methodologies, theories, angles, approaches, or conversations;

(2) Browse the **literature review, results, and conclusion** sections of the articles or books that are **particularly interesting to you**;

(3) **Narrow down to a few topics** and use them as **key words** for a new round of browsing;

(4) Do a close reading of a couple of articles and books that are most pertinent to your narrowed down list of topics; analyze them and find some key words (**key theories, key concepts, key theorists**); then use these key words to **conduct another round of research**;

(5) Dig into works **cited page, reference**, or **bibliography** of books and

articles to find some less researched gaps or controversial issues;

(6) Take some notes of the most relevant or significant sources when you are browsing.

While these strategies can be effective in helping find a good research topic, it is important that researchers know how to use these strategies. Here are a few tips on how to use these strategies:

(1) Don't limit yourself to one book/article. It is beneficial to finish reading one book or article if it is relevant, but oftentimes researchers will find it more beneficial to read works of different authors or theorists because this browsing can quickly bring you into the discourse community and give you a broader view of the issue than a single book or article.

(2) Don't just collect sources; analyze their perspectives, methodologies, conclusions as well as their blind spots, misinterpretations, and limitations.

(3) Don't take the sources for granted. Question their credibility, question their methodology, question their results, question their conclusions.

(4) Don't think that a good research topic will emerge after a few hours of searching online or reading. Try to use a map to guide your researching process.

2.2 Keep Research Logs

After settling on a topic, writers may start to develop ideas for the research topic. One effective approach to help writers generate ideas is to keep research logs.

2.2.1 Importance of Research Logs

A research log is a method used to track your research findings whether they are online or in person at an archive or a library. Researchers in general need some system of tracking the information and evidence they locate in order to determine whether or not that data proves a relationship or a theory. Very often, as beginners we get caught up in the excitement of a "find" or we hurry past other data that we feel isn't important – and we don't record our "data journey".

A research log is really more than just a "diary" of your reading journey on a particular topic. It can be useful especially when you need to return to certain data

sources in order to perform further evaluation in support of a theory. It can also keep record for yourself or others what you have already searched, what conflicting information you might come into when you later return to do additional research, and your log will remind you what you have already done and how you reached your conclusions.

2.2.2 Information and Strategies in Research Logs

Sure, you will save much time by keeping research logs as you review library materials. Record the author, title, call number and location of the book, publisher's name and location, year of publication, and the pages you consulted in the book. Beyond the bibliographical information, you use the research logs to develop ideas. For each source, especially the most important sources, you will write a research log that contains the bibliographical information and your comments and reflection on the source.

Typically in the research log, you may do some or all of the following:

- (1) Quote the sentences or paragraphs most important to your research topic;
- (2) Analyze the logical reasoning of the source;
- (3) Support or extend the arguments in the source with your own evidence or logical reasoning;
- (4) Refute the arguments in the source with your examples;
- (5) Question the credibility, evidence, logical reasoning, or methodology of the arguments in the source;
- (6) Comment on the limitations or the benefits of the methodologies in the source.

Listed below (Table 2 – 1) is a generic research log that you may use and modify for your own research log:

Alternatively, you may use the research logging method described by Bruce Ballenger's *The Curious Researcher*. When writing a research log, use the following format: