Choosing and Developing a Topic

Choosing a topic for your research paper or project can be the most difficult step, especially if you are able to write about any topic you want. Here are some suggestions for ways to choose a research topic.

Look at your textbook, notes, or handouts for possible ideas from issues discussed in class.

Look at magazines, journals, or online to discover current or controversial issues for your subject.

Choose a topic that interests you or has a practical application—maybe it is related to your future career or other plans you may have. Maybe you want to learn about a topic that would affect your daily life, such as sustainable cooking or cleaning.

Get into a journal database from the library website and browse through the information and topics presented.

If you have a broad direction to go in, read an encyclopedia or other short background article on the topic for ideas for a narrower issue to focus on in your paper.

Developing a topic before beginning extensive research can save a lot of time. Once you have settled on a topic, here are some things to think about:

What do you already know about the topic, and what are some other questions you have that you would like to have answered?

Is there a particular viewpoint you would like to present? The topic of alternative energy would be approached differently by engineers, environmentalists and economists. How do you want to approach the topic?

Developing a Research Statement and Search Terms

So you’ve chosen a topic—now it’s time to prepare to begin your research.

Start by writing a short list or paragraph describing your topic and the issues or ideas you want to discuss. Also write down the questions that you will want to address in your paper.

Look over what you wrote and look for connections, similarities, or groupings. Are these all reasons to support growing organic food? Did you write a lot about the ethical issues surrounding medical marijuana? Sometimes it can be helpful to draw a diagram that organizes similar concepts together.

Construct a concise sentence that works with your connections. For example: The BP oil spill has greatly affected President Obama’s alternative energy policies.

At this point, you might be ready to dive into researching. However, taking the time to think about possible search terms may save valuable time during the research process.

Go back to the list or paragraph you wrote about your topic and underline the important words in what you wrote: The BP oil spill has greatly affected President Obama’s alternative energy policies.

These will become the keywords you will use to search the KCC Catalog and journal databases.

For each underlined term, think of other words that could be used to describe that same idea:

BP oil spill could also be described as Gulf Coast oil spill or Gulf of Mexico oil disaster.

Alternative energy means the same as sustainable energy or sustainability, and renewable energy.

Policies could also be laws or legislation.

This step is important because not everyone who writes about this topic will use the same terminology to describe it.

Don’t forget! Help is available!

* If you need help finding resources or conducting searches, contact the LRC’s reference librarian at the reference desk in the LRC. If the desk is empty, ask at the circulation desk.

* If you need help writing your paper and citing sources, the KCC tutor lab can help! They are located on the third floor of the L building, and their phone number is 815-802-8474, email askthetutors@kcc.edu. Their services are FREE for KCC students and you don’t need an appointment.
Finding and Choosing Resources

The LRC webpage - www.kcc.edu/library - is an excellent place to find resources for your paper. In the middle of the page, under the word FIND, you will see ways to look for books, articles, encyclopedias, websites and more. Short descriptions of each are provided to help you decide which ones might be useful.

Another area to explore is the section under the title Subject Guides. These resources are a bit less general and are more specific to individual topics. These resources could be anything from article databases to websites to online image collections.

Analyze your topic to determine what resource might contain the most relevant information. If you are writing about medical marijuana policies, you might search a medical database for information about marijuana effects and its use in medicine, as well as a legal or political database for information about relevant laws or policies. Each different area you search will provide information from a different viewpoint.

Evaluating Resources

To help decide if a book will be a helpful resource, use the table of contents and check the index in the back for important terms relating to your topic. If it seems relevant, look through the list of works cited—these may also be good sources that you can track down.

For an article, read the abstract. Most articles in electronic databases have an abstract, which is a basic summary of what the article is about. This will help in your decision to download and/or print the article. Browse through it for important words and phrases, then read the paragraphs containing them to decide if the information supports your research.

For all resources, it is important that you evaluate them for quality as well as for content. It is especially important to critically evaluate resources for reliability and accuracy when doing research on the web. Following are some questions that should be answered for each resource that you use.

1. **Purpose**—Why was the book/webpage created? To sell a product, inform the public, promote a specific point of view?
2. **Authority**—Who wrote the book/webpage or produced it? On a webpage check for the “about this website” link. Is this person or organization considered an expert in the field? How do you know the person or organization is an expert? ANYONE can put anything on the web.
3. **Currency**—When was the book/webpage produced? Does it contain the most recent information? Does the most recent information matter for your topic?
4. **Accuracy**—How accurate is the information? How do you know it is accurate?
5. **Content**—What is the book or website about? Is it useful to your topic?

Some other issues to look out for on the web include:

- How did you find it? If it was through a library database, it is probably reliable. The quality of items retrieved from a search engine will vary greatly—evaluate them carefully! If it was cited in a reliable source or recommended by an instructor—it is probably reliable.

Look at the website’s domain. Sites ending in .edu (higher education), .gov (federal government) and .il.us (state government) are all generally reliable sources, though you will still want to be aware of any possible bias that may exist. Sites ending in .com are business or commercial and are likely to be trying to convince you to agree with their point. Websites with .org are advocacy websites—probably reliable info, but be aware of biases.

Integrating and Citing Sources

To use your sources in your paper, you can quote, paraphrase, or summarize them. Quoting is using the exact wording found in the source and distinguishing it from the rest of your paper with quotation marks, like “this.” This should be done less frequently in your paper than the other two methods.

Paraphrasing is rewording a section of a source with your own words, but leaving it roughly the same length as it originally appeared.

Summarizing is used to explain the general idea or main point of a source in a much shorter space, usually one or a few sentences. This is helpful for explaining a large number of sources in a short space.

Remember that all of these methods still need to be cited within your paper as well as on the works cited page at the end. To do this, follow the quote, paraphrase or summary with the author’s name and a page number, if applicable, in parenthesis. You will want to provide some sort of commentary on the source within your paper, to explain where it comes from and why it is relevant to your argument. If you name the author in this commentary, you can leave the name out of the parenthesis at the end, and just put the page number.

Don’t forget to include the works cited page at the end of your paper. This should include every source you cited—and should not include sources you did not cite within your paper.

For more information on citations, check out the citations section of the HELP page on the library website: www.kcc.edu/library/help. Here you will find resources for using citations, as well as a guide that shows you how to enter them using Word 2007.