Step 1. Select and Define a Topic

➤ **Task 1.** Identify and Define a Subject for Study

➤ **Task 2.** Translate the Personal Interest of Concern Into a Research Query

- *Activity 1. Discovering the Subject of Your Interest or Issue of Concern*

- *Activity 2. Focus a Research Interest*

- *Activity 3. Limit the Interest*

- *Activity 4. Select a Perspective*

- *Activity 5. Reflect and Develop a Query Statement*

➤ **Task 3.** Link the Research Query to the Appropriate Discipline

- *Activity 1. Become Familiar With the Academic Terminology Concerning the Study Topic*

- *Activity 2. Gain Entry to the Literature Concerning the Subject of Study*

- *Activity 3. Consult With Research Librarian(s)*

➤ **Task 4.** Write the Preliminary Research Topic Statement

Chapter Reading and Learning Strategy

This chapter contains both critical concepts and detail-directed activities. To maximize your learning capacity, employ the SQRRR* strategy when studying the text. Mind map the steps given for creating your preliminary topic statement. Journal your responses to the activities provided in your research diary. Use the entries in your research diary when you are consulting with the research librarian.

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* See Supplement D in the reference section of this text.

Chapter Learning Outcomes

At the completion of this chapter, you should

- Understand and apply the developmental steps for creating a preliminary topic statement

- Construct a preliminary topic statement that is researchable, relevant, and of significance

- Be proficient in accessing appropriate reference texts

- Be able to independently access and retrieve all necessary material from both your library stacks and online resources
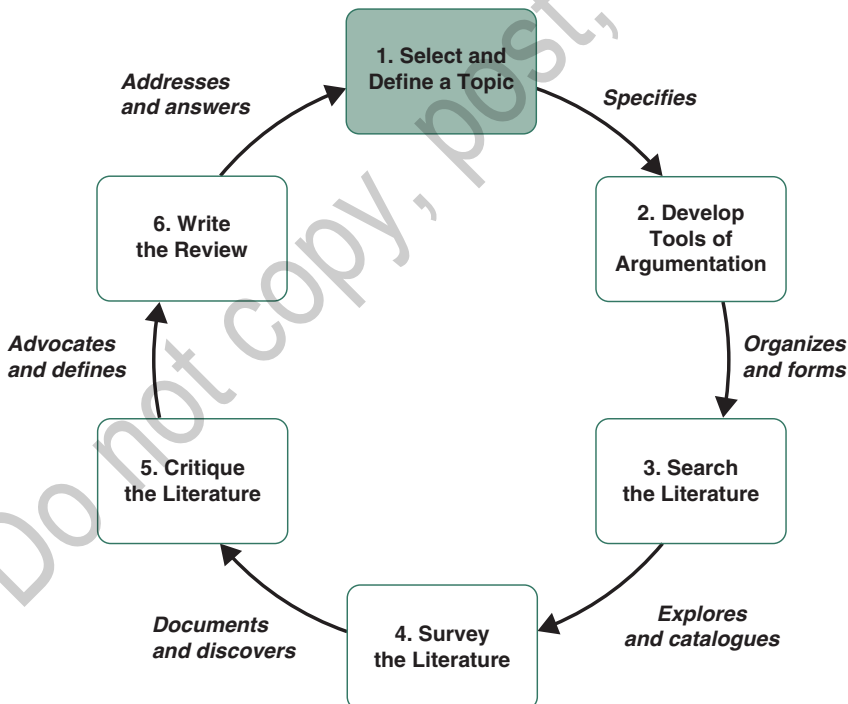
Step 1: Select and Define a Topic

From Personal Interest to Formal Research Topic

1

All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable, which makes you see something you weren't noticing, which makes you see something that isn't even visible.

—Leo Strauss

The Literature Review Model

Key Vocabulary

- **apprehension**: An act of learning, a need to grasp the knowledge to solve a problem or issue, either through a sensory perception or a grasping with the mind.

- **bias**: A strong feeling in favor of, or against, one group or one side of an argument, often not based on fair judgement.

- **personal Interest or Concern**: The subject or question that provokes the need to inquire. This should not be confused with a preliminary topic.

- **preliminary Topic**: A research interest statement that has been defined, limited to one subject of study, and linked to an appropriate academic discipline, enabling access to the relevant literature.

- **research Query**: A personal interest or concern that has been refined by focus, limit, and perspective.

Chapter Overview

Recognizing and defining a subject for study is the first step of a literature review. Subjects for study in the social sciences usually originate from the conflicts, issues, concerns, or beliefs encountered in daily life. Why do some actions in the course of work succeed while others fail? Why do some strategies or tactics succeed more than others? Why do people think, learn, and act in certain ways? In the social sciences, the issues or concerns tend to focus on questions about individuals, groups, or organizations and seek to examine some attitude, belief, behavior, or task. These questions stem from curiosity. They stimulate the need to seek answers, to do research. Notice that when you ask these types of questions, both emotional and intellectual capacities are in play.

Emotions trigger a curiosity that provides the personal energy and the motivation, the *how* and *why,* to act on the question. Appropriate motivation and energy are a matter of disposition. How you are disposed will determine the effort and commitment put toward any action. As discussed in the introduction, a proper mindset is crucial to a successful inquiry.

Intellect identifies the subject, the *what* of the question, and directs the course of action. The *what* is defined as a **personal interest or concern**. When doing a literature review, defining and clarifying the subject, the *what* of the research, is the first order of business. The

question that initially provoked curiosity must evolve to become a suitable subject for study.

Four tasks are required to create a research topic statement. They are (1) identifying a subject for study, (2) translating this personal interest or concern into a **research query**, (3) connecting the research query to the appropriate academic discipline, and (4) writing the **preliminary topic** statement. These tasks are the subject of this chapter. Figure 1.1 illustrates this process

Figure 1.1   The Process of Creating the Research Topic Statement

The Process of Creating the Research Topic Statement
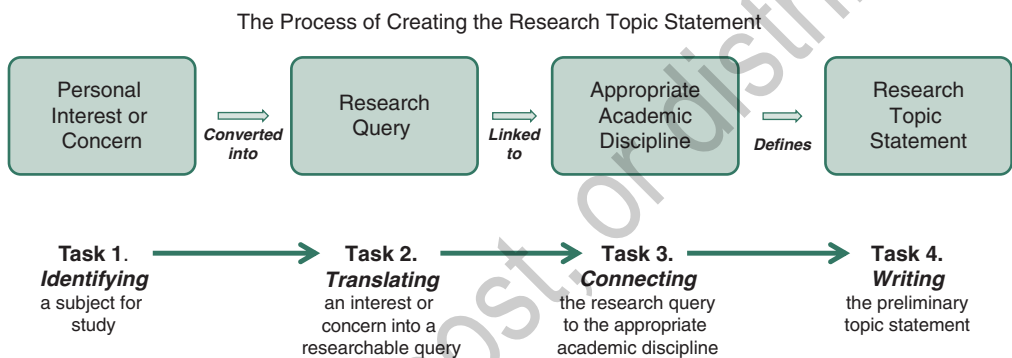
Task 1. Identify a Subject for Study

A typical applied research project in the social sciences begins by selecting an everyday problem, interest, or concern for further study. Selecting a suitable interest for research requires great care and forethought. "Hoe in haste, harvest in tears." A hasty choice of topic can have catastrophic consequences. Since the subject of study determines and directs the course of the work, employing good decision-making skills when making this selection is a must. A subject for study should ignite curiosity, engage emotions, and challenge thinking. Choose accordingly.

Personal reflection and introspection will uncover potential interests. For example: What is the learning style that best fits the high achieving independent learner? What are the characteristics of leaders who successfully lead organizations through a crisis?

Professional and public settings also provide a rich context for this introspection and supply fruitful opportunities for the discovery of a possible research topic. Examples from the workplace can identify both interests and concerns. Examples include: What causes the conflict among members of committee workgroups? How accurate are standardized test

scores in measuring individual student achievement? These questions might target potential subjects for study.

Organizationally, each of the following questions might provide a great beginning for topic development. What is the recipe for creating successful change? Is having a forceful leader a precondition for a successful group? How does a school principal guide a teaching staff toward improving student performance?

If introspection about the workplace does not provide an interest or concern, other sources can be used. Topic suggestions can come from experts knowledgeable in academic disciplines or from skilled practitioners in the field. Seek out those professionals you respect and ask them their thoughts about potential topics.

Perhaps reading various academic and professional trade journals can provide potential subjects. Journal articles frequently suggest topics for further research.

Tapping into media and professional association reports about current issues can also uncover research alternatives. The current national, state, or local debates and initiatives concerning our professional field can produce research interests as well.

Finally, you can identify the theoretical debates occurring in a chosen academic field. Weighing into the debate by applying applicable theory to argue the issue can very well be a subject for research. What theories in cognitive psychology speak to the developmental learning abilities of students? What does sociological theory predict about group behavior? How does theory in cultural anthropology provide an understanding of the culture of the work community? Theoretical models in the various social sciences can always provide new insights to both practical and theoretical questions. Potential subjects of study abound here.

The following is a list of possible resources to assist in identifying a subject for study:

- Workplace observation
- Professional experience
- Suggestions from experts
- Academic journals
- Topical debates within your profession
- Examining academic theory in your field

Activity 1. Discovering the Subject of Your Interest or Issue of Concern

Think back. Have you ever been confronted by a foreign idea, an unexplained issue, or a lack of knowledge about your studies or an issue in your workplace? This is an incomprehension, a not knowing, and should trigger an **apprehension**, a need to gain an understanding about this unfamiliar reality. Now, being aware that something is awry triggers you to stop and think. Something is off, but you aren't sure what is. You are vaguely able to point at it, give it a name, depict it, or see that it operates differently than expected. You see something, but it's not clear. What are you seeing? You have consciously uncovered a possible research interest.

Exercises

Exercises are found throughout this text to help with the various tasks of developing a literature review. The first four exercises in this chapter will employ free writes. A *free write* is spontaneous writing done without reference to notes or outlines. Its purpose is to explore what you have already internalized about a subject. These free write exercises will lead you through the four tasks; one will appear at the end of each of this chapter's subsections. The subject statement for each exercise is followed by guiding questions to help you free write. Respond to each question by writing ideas as they occur to you.

The following guiding questions will help specify your interests and reveal your personal attachments. These questions should enable you to pinpoint an interest and recognize your personal connection with the interest you wish to study. Use a separate page for each session. Write the topic and the questions for that exercise at the head of the paper. Then, answer each question in descending order. Read the question aloud, and then act quickly, allowing ideas and written responses to flow. As ideas come to mind, write them as simple, independent, declarative statements, one after the other, as quickly as possible. Do not be concerned with spelling, grammar, or composition.

Allow no more than 15 minutes for each session. If you have exhausted your responses to the questions before the end of 15 minutes, wait for a minute and then push yourself to find three more responses. After the exercise, leave the page, without reading it, for about a day. At the end of the 24-hour period, go back to your writing for that exercise. Read, review, edit, delete, and add whatever comes to mind. Follow this pattern for the exercise in each of the next four subsections.

Exercise 1.1

This exercise is asking you to stop and reflect. Think deeply; consider an issue or concept that caused you to feel an apprehension about what you experienced. Once you can picture the disconnect, use the following questions to assist you to fully uncover this possible research interest.

1. Describe your personal interest or issue?

2. What are the component parts of this interest?

3. Why did you become curious about this question?

Researcher Bias, Note Well

Researchers have opinions about the problems in their field and often have pet viewpoints to which they are committed. These preconceptions and personal attachments are both strengths and weaknesses in a research effort. Personal attachment to an interest provides the passion and dedication necessary for conducting good research, which is a plus. However, personal attachment can also carry **bias** and opinion, causing researchers to jump to premature conclusions. Rather than arriving at a conclusion based on methodical scholarly work, it is easy to succumb to bias. While bias and opinion can never be removed completely, they must be recognized and controlled.

How does a researcher control bias and opinion? First, careful introspection can bring these personal views forward, where they can be identified for what they are. By rationally identifying and confronting these views, the researcher can control personal bias and opinion and commit to being open-minded, skeptical, and considerate of research data. If these attachments remain embedded and unidentified, the research can be severely compromised. A researcher hobbled by unchecked bias can only produce biased findings.

Everyone has opinions and biases. Reflect beyond the commonly recognized ones, such as race, religion, politics, and gender, and consider also the endless variety of each individual's life experiences that influence viewpoint and decision making. For example, was your upbringing urban or rural? What and who were your early influences, and how have they formed your thinking? Is your view of the world formed by where you were raised? Whether we grew up in the desert, plains, forests, coasts, cities, or farms, none of us arrives at research as a blank slate. Honest, accurate research demands awareness of where there might be potholes that can throw the path of discovery off course.

Exercise 1.2

Understanding the Personal Viewpoint

1. What previous knowledge do you have about your interest?

2. What personal experience do you have that influences you about this issue or interest?

3. What are your beliefs, biases, and opinions about this interest or issue? Stop and think. Be honest with yourself.

4. What predisposes you to certain conclusions about the issue or concern of study?

5. How will you identify and isolate your personal bias, opinion, feelings, and intuition to preserve a neutral position as a researcher?

This exercise should uncover some caveats. Preconceived ideas are unavoidable but must not be allowed to control or influence the research. They can, however, be a point of entry to the significance, the *why*, of the research.

Task 2. Translate the Personal Interest or Concern Into a Research Query

After successfully identifying a personal interest or concern as a subject for study, turn to Task 2.

Consider which of these two statements would be easier to research: "How does the weather change from season to season?" Or, "To what degree is March weather in coastal northern California influenced by an Arctic flow of air?" The second statement plainly works better because it provides a clear definition of the subject. A clear definition allows a direct path to the available literature. Early considerations of a research interest are often stated too broadly. They lack subject focus, limitation, and perspective and are, at best, ill defined.

Activity 2. Focusing a Research Interest

When asked to select a research interest, many beginning researchers will provide a generalized statement. One such statement might be, "To what degree do standardized test scores predict actual student achievement?" The problem with this example is its lack of specificity. Given this statement as presented, could a researcher see and measure the

concern? Of course not. The interest, as expressed, is too broad. Its terms are not clearly defined.

The subject of any interest is defined by its key ideas, those words and phrases creating its meaning. A too-broad interest statement tends to be ambiguous and wordy, in need of precise definition. A hazy interest statement may contain assumptions and inferences that must be clarified. Broad scope and lack of a clear description of key ideas demand revision to sharpen the focus necessary to access the literature.

Examine the question about standardized tests scores stated earlier. What are its key ideas? To identify them, look first for the subjects, verbs, and objects of the sentence. In this interest statement, the subject is *scores*, the verb is *predict*, and the object is *achievement*. These are the key ideas to be examined. When taking apart this interest statement, it quickly becomes clear that this subject is too broad. What type of scores? What content do these test scores assess? What does the verb *predict* mean? How can we measure it? What does the object *achievement* mean? This interest needs to be more precisely defined. If the subject statement is ambiguous, the researcher cannot identify the actual subject of the review. Developing exact definitions for each of the key ideas that make up the interest statement brings the statement into focus. Once the subject is in focus, ensure its topic is limited.

Activity 3. Limiting the Interest

The second refinement limits the subject of interest. Limiting the interest means narrowing the study to one clearly defined subject. Does this interest contain multiple subjects for study? You must choose one subject to study, one that can be examined clearly.

Broad interests often contain multiple subjects that could be studied, each of which could provide important contributions. The trick is to settle on one interest. "I am interested in why students are not achieving," is one such case. This interest could be studied from an individual, group, or organizational perspective. For example, the research perspective could focus on the student, specifically on individual student behavior, attitude, skills, or knowledge. How can a change in student behavior affect performance on an achievement test? How do student attitudes affect performance in certain achievement assessments? Alternatively, the research perspective could focus on group behavior. How does a certain group respond to certain testing conditions? What are the effects of this kind of test on group performance? From an organizational

> ## Exercise 1.3
>
> ### Limiting the Interest of Your Study
>
> Remember to write your answers in detail so that you end up with a useful reference page.
>
> 1. Clearly identify the subject of the study interest.
>
> 2. Are you looking at individuals, groups, or organizations?
>
> 3. Specifically name the individuals, groups, or organizations that you plan to study.

viewpoint, a researcher might ask what effect providing pretest review time has on individual student achievement scores.

After limiting the broad interest, usable topic questions appear, such as, "To what degree are state standardized test scores in language arts predictive of individual student success in college placement in remedial classes?" Or, "How does teacher competency in test preparation of students affect student achievement on a standardized test?"

The preceding exercise probably produced many choices for possible research focuses. The next step is to select one of the possible subjects for study.

Activity 4. Selecting a Perspective

Once the subject focus is selected, choose the perspective or vantage point, the place from which to view the subject. What perspective most appropriately fits the query? Choice of perspective depends on the subject chosen for study and the unit of analysis from which the researcher has chosen to study it. What is the unit of analysis? Is this a study of individuals, groups, or organizations/communities? The unit of analysis is important because social science theory is divided in this way. The subject's unit of analysis must be linked to the appropriate academic discipline to gain access to the pertinent information about the subject.

For example, a researcher might study the communal behavior of groups and the effects this has on standardized testing and student achievement. Perhaps the researcher might address the social interactions that affect student achievement. If the subject is defined from the individual student's perspective, then psychology may provide the best vantage point. If the subject focuses on a community perspective, then

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Exercise 1.4

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Choosing the Perspective for the Study

1. What academic fields best lend themselves to your subject and perspective for research? (If you are still considering more than one perspective, choose a suitable academic field for each perspective.)

2. What are the specific knowledge areas of this academic field that will best help in exploring and defining the research subject?

3. What knowledge competency do you have in this academic field?

4. What additional knowledge of this academic field do you need to acquire to have a solid foundation to address this interest?

cultural anthropology may provide the best vantage point. If the subject is achievement from the perspective of group reactions and interactions, then sociology may provide the best vantage point. As with the focus, the researcher must narrow the perspective. Probably choices surfaced from the previous exercise. Select the discipline and unit of analysis that present the best perspective for accessing data about the subject of study.

Clearly defined key ideas, a limitation of subject, and the perspective for study transform a broad personal interest into an acceptable research query.

Activity 5. Reflection: The Key to Interest Selection and Developing the Research Query Statement

The key to developing a successful research topic is the ability to examine the personal interest, concern, or problem to study. The more clarity and specificity brought to bear in defining the interest, the easier it is to connect this interest to a researchable topic of study.

Experience with students choosing interests shows that beginning researchers sometimes neglect to take the time necessary to reflect on what they will actually study. Selecting an interest of study haphazardly without considering intent, perspective, or vantage point can produce awkward and unsatisfactory results. Therefore, taking time to carefully choose an interest for study is essential for all researchers.

Taking a personal interest and transforming it into a usable research query is much like setting up a photograph. For example, compare

selecting a subject for research to photographing a scene. Imagine yourself standing at Big Rock Campground in Joshua Tree National Park. Around you are miles of desert with shifting light and shadow. Perhaps there are also people, reptiles, plants, or insects in your scene. Do you want a photo of an ancient juniper tree, or do you want a picture of a family around a campfire? What is the purpose of the photograph, and what is your goal? If your goal is to record the entire park through time, you would have a lifetime's work. Usually, though, the intent is not to photograph the entire park or to study everything about a subject from all perspectives. Instead it is to select one worthy subject of interest and to do it justice using your chosen perspective.

For both the photographer and the researcher, an initial interest in a subject triggers the task. In both cases, there is a specific image of the outcome expected. Also, in both cases, that early expectation will, in all likelihood, be different from what actually results. The selection of the subject of a photograph is just a starting point. A satisfactory end product will appear only after much exploration into focus, intent, and perspective, each of which will change as you delve deeper into the subject. Perhaps the final photo will be substantially different from what was originally conceived. In both photography and research, it is necessary to be willing to see what actually works and to continue down productive paths and abandon those paths that meander aimlessly without leading to satisfactory results. The first photograph may be of a jagged rock, but the final photo may be a close-up of the quartz fragments in one section of metamorphic stone in that jagged rock.

Like a photographer, a researcher must have a subject of interest that launches the inquiry and must also craft and mold the result. The researcher follows a path that works to define the research interest rather than simply adhering to the original intent. Evidence, whether of the eye or the mind, must lead the way.

Exercise 1.5

Developing the Research Query Statement

This exercise combines and patterns the information gathered from previous free writes. Reflect on and analyze the written information produced by the earlier exercises and develop a specific statement of interest. Initially, this statement could be a single question or the research query statement. Make it clear and concise. Develop a second statement

(Continued)

(Continued)

that defines the significance of the research. Finally, write a statement that clearly defines the beliefs, values, biases, and opinions relating to your research and note how you will avoid or accommodate them.

Using the information gained through previous introspective work in Exercises 1.1 through 1.4, answer the following three questions:

1. What is your specific personal interest?

    • The interest, issue, or concern of my research is
      _____. (Answer in seven sentences.)

    • Cross out the two least important sentences without changing
      the key idea.

    • Cross out any words or phrases that can be removed without
      changing the meaning.

    • Reduce the remaining draft to three sentences.

    • Be sure the final three sentences identify the subject (what
      you are studying), perspective (how you are looking at it), and
      vantage point (which academic field you are using).

2. What contributions to the field justify this research?

3. What are your beliefs, values, biases, and opinions about
    this interest?

    • Will any of these beliefs, values, biases, and opinions help you
      in conducting your research?

    • How will you prevent the beliefs and biases contained in your
      personal viewpoint from affecting the necessary neutral stance
      of a researcher?

Now, using your answers for Questions 1 through 3, write a statement that clearly defines the interest for your research work, a statement that defines the significance of your research, and a statement that defines your personal tendencies and how you will control them. When completed, you will have a researchable interest.

Task 3. Link the Research Query to the Appropriate Discipline

The last concern of this chapter is refining the personal interest of a study statement into a suitable topic for formal research. Begin by reviewing your progress so far. Refer back to Figure 1.1, introduced earlier in the

chapter. The figure provides four tasks for creating an acceptable topic for research. Reading from left to right, notice that Task 1 is selecting an interest that has been identified as a subject for study. You focused the interest by clarifying and defining its core ideas and then limited the interest to one subject. Task 2 was to select a perspective, a link to a specific discipline, used to access the pertinent literature. This created a research query statement. Now it is time to reword the personal interest statement using the language of the chosen academic perspective.

Addressing Task 3 of Figure 1.1 leaves personal understanding and turns to the shared knowledge about the subject provided by the academic community. To accomplish this task, align the research interest statement with the external concern and work of that academic community. Why is this important? Without aligning the research interest to the topic of study as addressed by the academic community, there is no avenue or language to gain access and entry to the relevant academic body of knowledge.

Some students believe having a well-defined personal interest statement provides sufficient topic definition to proceed directly into research. These students then complain that they searched the Internet, spent hours in the library, and exhausted the library's online resources. They worked hard at gathering information about their topic but could find nothing written on it. These students were using their everyday vocabulary to access the specific language, vocabulary, and discourse of a specialized field.

Rarely does a researcher stumble onto a unique and previously unidentified topic of study. Previous work has been done on almost all of the interests under consideration. So, what is the difficulty? The difficulty is a lack of linkage between the wording of subject definition and appropriate academic terms of the academic discipline. Word usage and meaning are particular to context. All academic fields have an esoteric language to describe their subjects of study. The chances are remote that a researcher's use of everyday language conforms to the technical language an academic field uses.

For example, consider the word *conflict*. Informally, *conflict* is defined as a disagreement or argument or as an incompatibility of goals between parties. As used in the discipline of history, *conflict* could mean a war, as in an armed conflict. As used in organizational psychology, *conflict* is an organizational breakdown of the standard mechanisms of decision making. As used in social psychology, *conflict* is behavior that occurs when two or more parties disagree. As used in personal psychology, *conflict* may refer to a person's internal struggle. As used in literature, *conflict* is whatever keeps a character from achieving a goal. Each academic discipline defines terms to meet its specific needs.

A researcher must study the specialized vocabulary of the academic field chosen and become familiar with the terminology that identifies the potential subject of study. Once functionally skilled in the appropriate language, a researcher can easily translate the key ideas that provide subject definition and topic definition for the subject of study.

Three activities must be accomplished in order to complete Task 3. They are (1) becoming familiar with the academic terminology, (2) entering the discourse about the intended subject of study, and (3) consulting with a research librarian (Figure 1.2).

The reference section of the library provides the necessary tools to easily complete the jobs of Task 3. For Activity 1, begin by consulting the *subject-area thesauri and dictionaries* to become familiar with the academic terminology that fits the interest statement. Each of these references has a particular purpose. Use a *subject-area thesaurus* to find the synonyms that link appropriate academic terminology to the keywords of the interest statement. Using this reference may also produce particular words that better define and narrow the topic of study.

The *subject-area dictionary* provides a different reference point. Using the results of the thesaurus search, consult these specialized dictionaries to determine if the definition of the terms selected fits your needs. Note here, when querying subject-area dictionaries and thesauri, locate the language used by the academic discipline to define the topic. These references provide the language familiarity and phrasing necessary to

Figure 1.2 Task 3: Link the Research Query to the Appropriate Discipline

JOB	PURPOSE	REFERENCES*	LIBRARY ACCESS	VIRTUAL LIBRARY ACCESS
Activity 1	Become familiar with the academic terminology	Subject-area thesauri and dictionaries	In reference stacks, catalogued by academic discipline	Either: Do a keyword search. Query by keyword, by particular reference type, or by availability online
Activity 2	Enter the discourse about the intended subject of study	Subject-area encyclopedias and handbooks		
Activity 3	Consult with a research librarian			Or Query *Library A–Z* on the main page of the library website. Reference types will be in alphabetical order.

* The reference texts used in Task 3 are particular to a specific academic discipline. Thesauri, dictionaries, encyclopedias, and handbooks are compiled for each social science discipline. Seek out the appropriate ones. Do not use generic references for this task. This is crucial when researching online, as not all sites are reliable.

transform the terms of the interest statement into a viable preliminary topic statement, a statement aligned to the chosen academic field. Once you have identified the correct terms that correspond to your interest, you have completed Activity 1.

Using the newly found terminology, consult the *subject-area handbooks and encyclopedias* to access the academic discourse about the topic. *Subject-area handbooks* discuss the theories relating to the topics of their academic field. They provide a great head start in determining the boundaries for the literature search and in creating an overview of the academic discourse about the subject.

Subject-area handbooks can be organized in three ways. First, handbooks can discuss theory as it evolves. This is done chronologically. A theory is first discussed, and as it changes, the commentary evolves. Second, theories can be organized topically. In this case, find the research topic that aligns to your needs and review the section for the appropriate discussion about that theory. Third, handbooks may be organized around current discussions in the field. This type of handbook deals with the hot topics in the academic area and the emerging theoretical considerations.

Subject-area encyclopedias also provide great access to the academic discourse on the subject. Because encyclopedias are organized alphabetically, it is easy to find the theory and discussion relating to a specific topic. Using the keywords and terms selected from Activity 1, simply page to the reference point in the encyclopedia and read on. The encyclopedic entry will begin with an overview of the subject, followed by a detailed discussion of the relevant theory. Lastly, the entry will list the relevant contributors and authors for further study.

By consulting the appropriate subject-area encyclopedias and handbooks, you will have translated the everyday language of the interest statement into the terminology of an academic field. This will also provide an overview of the topic and the relevant theory and discourse about the topic. Finally, you have built a beginning list of the theories and contributing authors in order to begin the literature search. Activity 3 is complete.

Just a word about where to find these important reference tools in the library: When using a university library, find the reference section or reference stacks. The reference books will be cataloged by academic discipline. Seek out the appropriate discipline for your interest and find the references that address the topic. These tools should be available electronically as well. Access to references should be found on the main page of your library's website.

There are two basic options to use when consulting the library's main page. First, do a keyword search. This query will request three pieces of information: (1) keyword, (2) the particular reference text category, and (3) the library location, which, in this case, is online. For instance, if you are looking for dictionaries, type in *keyword, dictionaries, virtual online*. This query will display all of the reference dictionaries available online. Simply select the academic discipline dictionaries appropriate to your perspective, and you are on your way. The second option can usually be found on the main page of the virtual library portal. It is a subject "hot button" called *Library A–Z*. When clicking this hot button, a new screen will appear providing an alphabetical listing of all the resources in the virtual library. Scroll down to the reference category needed and click it. All of those references will be displayed. For example, say you are looking for handbooks. Click *Library A–Z* on the main page of the library portal. An alphabetical listing of the library resources will appear. Scroll down to the *H* section of the listing, find *Handbooks*, and click that entry. All of the handbooks available will appear, and you can sort through them to determine the appropriate entries for the review.

By using the new language and definitions found when completing Activities 1 and 2, the interest statement is now linked and translated into the vocabulary of the academic discipline. Now it is time to seek advice. Make an appointment with the university's research librarian. Consultation can be done at a university library or online, as available. The purpose is to discuss the research interest as it has now developed. Look for confirmation about your thinking, a critical review of the interest statement, and tips and advice.

Rules for Library Use: A Primer

Before your first trip to the library, whether you are consulting online resources (your library's virtual site) or an actual library, stop for a minute and review some important rules on library use. Heeding these rules will save time and produce better results.

Rule 1. Know Your Librarian

- The research librarian, whether online or in person, is a friend, a guide, and a coach. When using a library for the first time, consult first with a research librarian. Make sure that you have formed a positive relationship and can rely on the librarian as coach, mentor, and confidant.

Rule 2. Be Purposeful

- Have a clear purpose and plan when researching. Wandering the stacks, exploring the subject catalogue, or surfing websites is entertaining, but it is seldom productive.

- Every time you conduct research, know what you are looking for and where to get it.

- Have a strategy for research. Planning saves time. Know what you want to do before you take your first step. What types of information do you need, and where can they be found? Are you scanning the subject catalogues to refine your topic? Are you consulting the specific subject dictionaries to define terms?

- Have a schedule of work and specific outcomes in mind for the visit. Set goals, and stick to them. Brick-and-mortar and online libraries present many temptations and distractions—a provocative title that catches the eye, a new book from a favorite author, an enticing reference link. You must be disciplined. Honor your time, schedule your breaks, and focus on the task.

- Finally, before ending a session, plan the next tasks. What work must be done next? What is the timeline? What new resources do you need? Address these questions as part of a debriefing with your written notes. Remember, we have short memories. Waiting to write notes later invites ambiguity and misdirection.

Rule 3. Remember That Preparation Equals Efficiency

- Be prepared. Develop and organize cataloging and documenting tools before beginning a research session.

- Use cataloging to codify the library materials you have accessed in such a way that you can easily refer back to them and can properly identify them by the library indexing system for further reference. Cataloging tools range from simple 3 x 5 index cards to research software tools. RefWorks is available on most university websites, or you can purchase software such as EndNote or Citation.

- Know that documentation tools are repositories of notable information. They can store notes about a subject, quotes, and abstracts; further references to explore; subject maps; or a list of tasks to be completed next. Documentation tools contain library data collected for study. These tools also have various

levels of sophistication, the simplest being a notebook or notepad. The more complex and integrated ones are software such as EndNote, Zotero, Microsoft OneNote, ISI ResearchSoft Reference Manager, or RefWorks.

- Take the time before you begin researching to build an organizational system that fits your learning style and will aid you through the entire literature review. Organizing now will save much time and heartache later.

Task 4. Write the Preliminary Research Topic Statement

You now have the necessary information to complete Task 4: writing the preliminary research topic statement. Using the new language and definitions found when completing Task 3, rewrite the interest statement. Review the reframed statement to determine if it adequately addresses the intent of your interest. If so, you have now constructed a preliminary topic statement for your study. If not, rework and revise the study's focus and vantage point, or search the reference works further for other terms that would better suit your interest. Use these options until you are satisfied that the preliminary topic statement aligns with the original interest statement. Task 4 has been accomplished. You are now ready to learn about argumentation.

The following exercise will guide you through the task of transforming the formal interest statement written in Exercise 1.1 into a preliminary topic of research. It requires you to complete the following:

- Conduct a first conversation with a research librarian.

- Define the key terms of the interest statement.

- Translate the key terms and core ideas of the interest statement.

- Rewrite the interest statement into a preliminary topic statement.

Exercise 1.6

Refining the Research Topic Statement

1. Conduct a first conversation with a research librarian.

   a. Make an appointment with a research librarian or connect with your school's online librarian. Explain your research project.

Provide the interest statement to the librarian for review and advice. Consider conferring with your research faculty adviser or other faculty member for coaching on the formal research interest statement.

b. When meeting with the research librarian, review your interest statement. State the perspective and academic vantage point chosen for your interest. Seek advice on the clarity and specificity of your work. If the librarian does not understand your interest as stated, go back to Exercise 1.5 and reframe the interest based on that information.

c. Ask the librarian to provide a survey of the library. Get the specifics of the inner workings of the reference section, stacks and holdings, periodicals, cataloging system, search capacities, and Internet access. Pay particular attention to the library's ability to address the academic field chosen for the study and the stated research interest. If you need more resources to complete your study, consult with the librarian.

d. Review the key terms and core ideas contained in the interest statement. Ask the librarian how to access the subject-area dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, and other reference books that address these terms and ideas. This can be done in person or online.

2. Define the key terms of the interest statement.

a. Using the key terms, consult the chosen subject-area dictionaries, encyclopedias, and handbooks. Find the technical definitions of your key terms.

b. Rewrite the interest statement using the technical terms of that academic field.

c. Review the reframed statement. Does it still express your intended interest? If it does not, rework and revise the study's focus and vantage point or search the reference works for other terminology to use until the reframed statement expresses your research interest.

d. When the reframed statement works, go to Number 3.

3. Translate the key terms and core ideas of the interest statement.

a. Taking your reframed interest statement, search the subject-area encyclopedias, handbooks, yearbooks, and other reference materials for topic areas that address the core ideas

(Continued)

(Continued)

   contained in your reframed interest. Rewrite as the topic of your study.

  b. Document and catalog the results, noting prevalent authors and theories.

  c. Begin to build subject and author maps for each of the core ideas in the interest statement.

  d. Review all work. Check for accuracy and understanding.

4. Rewrite the interest statement as the preliminary topic of your study.

Tips

1. Make sure your interest is specific. Reflect on the key terms that make up your interest statement. Be sure that you clearly understand what the key terms mean and how they interact.

2. Focus the interest to ensure that it is clearly described and singularly defined.

3. Select an academic perspective and translate the key terms to those used in that academic field.

4. Approach research with an open mind.

5. Document, document, document.

Summary

You now have the preliminary topic for study. You have successfully conducted personal introspection to identify an interest, and you have refined that interest as a potential subject suitable for study. Next is learning about argumentation. While the work seems linear, it is not. Notice that in Figure 1.1 the personal interest informs the research query. The opposite also holds true. The research query informs the personal interest. The thinking needed to unmask the specific ideas in one of these statements requires knowledge of the other. The deep or fundamental understanding of one refines the understanding of the other. So it is with a research query and the academic discipline knowledge base. The more you learn about the topic through initial reading in the literature, the more refined the topic becomes. Refinement is an essential part of subject exploration and topic definition.

Checklist

Task	*Completed*
1. Write a clear, specific description of your personal interest.	☐
2. Define the key concepts and terms contained in your area of interest.	☐
3. Reread your interest statement to check that you are studying only one subject. Is the subject too broad or too narrow?	☐
4. Select an academic perspective, a specific field of study that aligns with your research subject.	☐
5. Become familiar with the resources and the structure of your library. Engage a research librarian in an introductory session regarding the subject of study.	☐
6. Prepare documenting tools.	☐
7. Rewrite the research query statement as a preliminary topic statement using the correct academic terms.	☐

Reflective Exercise

A. Your Mindset

This chapter was very complex and full of detailed directions and tasks. Given this context

- Were you able to maintain your focus and stay with the text?

- Did you work to gain a deep understanding of the concepts and procedures explained in this chapter?

- Were you patient with yourself when you grappled with any unfamiliar concepts?

B. Check for Understanding

- Were you able to construct your topic statement to your satisfaction?

  o Did you identify an appropriate subject for study?

  o Is your subject of interest researchable?

  o Did you connect to an academic discipline?

          ○ Does your prelimi∘nary topic statement reflect what you want to do, and is it relevant and significant to the academic discipline?

C. How Am I Learning?

- Were you doing a check for understanding while reading this chapter, so you could maximize your ability to retain the information?

- Were you able to collaboratively learn when working with the research librarian?

D. Reflect to Correct

- What do you still need to know to successfully build a preliminary topic statement?

- What more do you need to know to effectively use the library resources available? Who do you need to consult to make this happen?