How to develop a good research topic

[Video Transcript]

Intro: This transcript was created to make the related video content more accessible

Total Time: 4:34

00:00:00 – 00:00:13

Narrator - In this video, you will learn how to develop a good research topic. To start out, let’s first answer the question why it’s important to know how to develop a good research topic.

00:00:14 – 00:00:35

Narrator - Think of it this way: During your time as a student - and perhaps even later – you will probably write a good number of research papers. While some instructors might provide you with a list of research topics to choose from, others might not. So what can you write about?

00:00:36 – 00:02:01

Narrator - Let’s first answer the question ‘What makes a topic really good’? Three things worth mentioning here:

First, it’s a topic that strongly interests you. This is very important. Make sure that the topic you pick – the topic you will write about – is a topic that interests you, fascinates you, that you want to talk about. Really, there is nothing worse spending a lot of time writing about a topic that bores you.

Second, make sure you topic is creative. What do we mean by that? Well, there are some topics that have just been written about over and over and over again. Can you come up with a topic that, perhaps, hasn’t been covered that much? Try to pick something that is creative and exciting to you and your peers. Writing about Shakespeare’s dramas is great, but that topic in itself has been covered extensively, so try to find something that might be a little more creative than that.

And third, speaking of “Shakespeare’s dramas”, make sure you pick something that is not too broad. Look at your assignment prompt. How many pages are you supposed to write? If you get a five page paper as an assignment, well, “Shakespeare’s dramas” is just going to be a little bit too broad. So make sure the topic you choose fits the scope of your paper.
Sometimes, it can be really difficult to find a topic that is not too broad. Here are a couple of words of advice on what to do when your topic seems too broad.

Let’s say you are in an environmental science class. You’re teacher gives you this assignment prompt: Write a research paper on a topic dealing with a current environmental issue. Your paper should not exceed five pages, and should be based on a topic that strongly interests you.

Well, you say, that’s no problem! I know exactly what to write about! I saw this show the other day on TV, and it talked about the effects of deforestation on gorillas in Africa. I think that’s a great topic! I know it interests me, and, it’s creative. So let’s write about it!

Well, not so fast. Remember, your paper is only supposed to be five pages. How are you going to fit that topic into a five page paper? That’s going to be difficult. So what could you do instead?

The key is to add more context. For example, you could add some geographical context to your paper. Is there a geographic region or country, in which gorillas are specifically affected by deforestation?

Perhaps you want to focus more on a historical context. Is there a certain time aspect you want to write about, perhaps a time when deforestation really started to affect gorillas?

And third, with this topic you could also add biological context. Perhaps there is a specific sub-species of the gorilla that you are interested in writing about.

So when we combine all three contexts and incorporate them into the original topic, this is what we get:

Something like: “Current Effects of deforestation on the mountain gorilla in south west Uganda.” We thereby incorporate the historical context, the biological context, and the geographical context. Adding context truly is a great way of narrowing your topic.