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Project Planner

Defining a Topic

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This stage will:

- Help you decide what to study
- Explain how to choose a good research project
- Provide an overview of the research practicalities you should consider

Before you start your research, you need to define your topic and develop a research question or hypothesis. You already know your general area of interest, which is probably linked to your discipline of study. Next, you have to specify a particular area of interest which is appropriate for research and which you will enjoy working on. Before choosing a topic, it might be useful to read some of the basics about why we do research, if you haven't already.

Read more about [why we do research](#)

How Can I Decide What to Study?

First, you should think about these three points:

Your project must be something that interests you enough to keep you motivated to start researching it, keep researching it and finish writing it up. If possible, do research on something you are fascinated by or on an issue you are passionate about.

You must have enough understanding of the area you're interested in to do something useful when you investigate it. Think about what you know about the way that social scientists engage with your topic area and be willing to read around your topic to learn what you don't already know.

You may be lucky enough to be able to embark on a project which is entirely your own. You may be working on a project which your university supervisor has designed already. Or, you may be employed as a professional researcher on a project defined by someone else. Whatever your circumstances, choice remains an important consideration. You need to like your topic to have the motivation to succeed.

How Do I Identify a Good Research Topic?

There are five key things to think about in order to make sure that your topic is good enough to begin re-searching it.

You should find your topic interesting. This is important to ensure that you are enthusiastic enough about your topic to want to work on it for an extended period of time.

You should know something about the whole field surrounding your topic. At first this might not be very much—quite often, the broad outline of a topic will come to you because of a current academic debate or an issue presented in the media. The important thing is that your curiosity is stimulated and you want to delve further. You will expand your knowledge of the field through your [literature search](#).

You won't be able to define the precise focus of your investigation immediately, but you will likely know enough to narrow it down to something that can be described in one or two paragraphs. Nearly always, at whichever level you're working, you will have to get approval for your research proposal. You need to know enough now to be able to develop your proposal.

There are several important access questions to think about when identifying your research topic. Depending on your topic and the type of data you'll be generating or accessing, one or more of these questions will need to be answered.

- Can you physically access the locus of your research?
- Are there gatekeepers who will be able to grant or deny you access?
- Will there be political or administrative obstacles?
- Can you reach the people you need to interview, survey, or observe?
- Do you have the language skills you need?
- If you're using documents or data that already exist, can you access the materials you need in archives, physically, or online?

A good research topic is one which you can do with the time and resources you have. Remember, time is money—your own time is a major resource. The resources you have will influence how you will do the re-

search, but you need to have enough to do justice to the topic.

Read more about the [literature search](#)

Read more about writing a [research proposal](#)

[Search for resources about access](#)

What Practical Things Should I Think About Before I Start My Research?

A research project has to be doable. That means that you must be able to see not only what it should be and how it might be done in the most ideal possible set of circumstances, but also how you could do it given your time, money, existing resources, knowledge, and expertise. You should be able to do enough to fulfil the aim of your research and, in one way or another, add to our knowledge of the social world.

Every research project is constrained because we never have limitless resources. So, you have to make sure that you have enough resources in hand to get the job done. These constraints include:

- [Time available](#)
- [Material resources required](#)
- [Ethical approval](#)

The first constraint is always your own time. The following aspects are all important, but some will be more vital to you than others.

What is the deadline for the production of the research output? This could be a submission deadline for students or any other deadline for other researchers.

How much of your own time can you devote to the project? There are always other calls on your time, some of which you can anticipate. For example:

- **Other work:** An undergraduate or Master's student might have to get other assignments done alongside their dissertation/thesis. A PhD researcher might have teaching or research assistant commitments.
- **Other aspects of your life:** Remember you should have one! Friends, family, work—it's good to have balance.

Think as if Murphy's Law always holds—if something can go wrong it will. This might not be the case, but if you anticipate what could go wrong and how you could deal with it, then you won't be overwhelmed if it does happen.

You will usually need a computer of your own and access to secure back-up storage. For researchers without access to a personal computer, it is still possible to do good research with no more than a pen and a pad of paper, but it is harder.

It's important to have somewhere to work—this could even be your own bedroom, but you have to have somewhere to think and to write in reasonable peace and comfort.

Do you need to travel to do your research? Is there transport available? Do you have the money to pay for travel?

Do you need to employ assistants? Have you got the money to pay them?

Do you have access to the people or the place that you will be researching, or can you get it?

Depending on your research area, gaining [ethical approval](#) may involve differing amounts of time and effort. You will likely have to produce one of the following before beginning your research.

You may simply require an adequate statement about ethical issues in your research proposal. “Adequate” means you have identified the potential ethical issues and said how you would handle them in doing the research.

For most research in Health and related areas, such as Social Care, you will have to submit a detailed ethical statement to a formal body for approval. You will have to be able to justify not only the ethical conduct of the research, but also argue for the appropriateness of the methods you deploy. This can be tricky when the approval body does not include members who understand your approach.

You may have to get some sort of certification before you can engage with your research subjects. For example, if you are doing any research with children, you may have to get police clearance, which demonstrates

that you have no record of child abuse which would make it inappropriate for you to engage with them. Remember, this takes time.

[Search for resources about research ethics](#)

Checklist: Questions to Ask Yourself When Deciding on a Topic

Here are some questions to ask yourself when deciding on a topic. Although some may not be relevant to your topic, you should be able to honestly answer “yes” to most of them.

- **Are you interested enough in the topic?**

You need to be motivated to start your project, carry out the research, and see it through to the end.

- **Do you know enough about the general context of the topic you want to work on?**

You need this to be able to develop a decent account of what you are looking for in your research. If you lack this knowledge, you'll need time to develop it.

- **Can you refine your topic down to a description of doable research?**

- **Do you know how you will actually do the research?**

You will need the appropriate data gathering skills and competencies—or the time to learn them before starting your research.

- **Do you know what resources you need to do the research?**

You'll also need to know how and where to get them.

- **Do you know what kind of ethical approval you need?**

You'll need to get this organized in time to start the research.

- **Can your project be done in the time available?**

- **Can you get access to the research context?**

You also need to know how you'll get that access.

- **Can you work out a timetable for getting the research done and written up?**

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