



From a Topic to a Research Question

Step 1: Brainstorm

1. Write down topics that interest you. If you have a specific discipline in mind, such as “Economics” or “History”, include that as well. Don’t worry about your topics being too broad at this stage.

Step 2: Use background information and search results to begin narrowing your topic.

2. Read about your topic in encyclopedias and search for your topic in [PSU’s Primo database](#). This lets you see what others are writing about your topic. As you read background articles and peruse search results, consider specific aspects of your topic that may interest you. What aspects about your topic most interest you? Write these topics down here, or create a concept map ([see the UNC guide to Concept Maps](#)).

Step 3: Move from a narrower topic to a question

3. Review what you wrote above and choose one aspect to explore more deeply. Write it down here. It doesn’t need to be formulated into a question yet.

4. Write down key search terms related to your narrower aspect/topic.
5. Search these new keywords in [PSU's Primo Database](#) to find background information. Read the results!
6. Based upon the articles you've found and read, write a question you'd like to explore. Make sure it isn't a yes/no question. It should be an open-ended question (how, why, etc.)

Step 4: Test your question

7. Write down the key concepts in your question, then brainstorm search terms for those concepts. You will use these terms, connected with AND and OR, to search through [subject-specific search tools](#) for sources.
8. [Search library resources](#) using these search terms. For this search, use targeted tools such as discipline-specific article databases. Are there enough secondary sources to answer your question? Are they in a language you feel comfortable using for in-depth research? This step helps you ensure your specific question is researchable.
9. What primary sources (ex: first-hand narratives, films, newspaper articles, data, novels) do you need to answer your question? Are these available? Are they in a language you would use for research? You might need to ask a librarian or your professor for help at this stage.

