LESSON 1

Choose a Topic

Turn something you're curious about into a focused starting point.

About 90 min | Reading 25 min | Slides 60 min | Quiz 5 min

> **Learning objective.** By the end you will be able to turn a broad interest into a focused, researchable topic and a first draft research question.

Key points

- Start with something you genuinely wonder about.
- Narrow it with who, what, where and when until it fits a few weeks.
- Turn it into a draft question, and expect it to change as you read.

Learn

Good research starts with curiosity. Pick something you actually wonder about, because you will spend weeks with it. Then take a quick look around (an encyclopedia entry, a news article, a search or two) to see what people already say about it and which words they use.

Most first ideas are too big. 'Social media' or 'climate change' could fill a library. Shrink yours by asking who, what, where, when and why: a specific group of people, a place, a time period, or one angle. If you can't find anything at all, your topic is probably too narrow, so widen one of those limits again.

Finally, rephrase your topic as a question. A question gives your reading a direction and tells you when you have found something useful. Expect this question to change. Researchers often go back to this step after reading more, and that is normal, not a mistake.

Example

> Maya loves basketball and starts with 'sports injuries.' That's huge. She narrows it by who (high school athletes), what (ankle sprains), and where (girls' basketball). Her draft question becomes: 'What factors are linked to ankle sprains in high school girls' basketball players?' A quick search turns up a few studies, so the scope works. Later, after reading, she might change it to focus on prevention programmes instead.

Across disciplines

In the sciences a question often points toward something you can measure or test. In the humanities it may ask how a text, artwork or event can be interpreted. Social science questions often look at patterns in people's behaviour or experiences.

Watch

Picking Your Topic IS Research!, NC State University Libraries (3 min): youtube.com/watch?v=Q0B3Gjlu-1o

> **Takeaway.** A good topic is something you care about, narrowed into a clear question that you expect to keep refining.

Try it: From big idea to research question

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Freewrite for 3 minutes, listing everything you are curious about, then circle one idea.

2. Write the circled idea in the middle of a page and add who, what, where, when and why branches to narrow it.

3. Run one quick search with your narrowed topic and note whether you get too many results, too few, or a workable number.

4. Write one draft research question, plus a backup version that is slightly broader or narrower.

Lesson 1 quiz

Circle one answer for each question. Pass mark: 4 of 5.

1. Which feasibility factor asks: "Can I reach the people, places, texts or data I need?"

A Resources
B Skills
C Access
D Time

2. A student studying economics writes "the economy" as their topic. According to the decision guide, what should they do next?

A Start by reading every book and article they can find about the economy
B Turn it into a yes/no question such as "Is the economy good?"
C Switch to an experiment so the project sounds more scientific and rigorous
D Add limits (place, time, group), e.g. food prices in our town

3. A student studying biology plans to track a tree's growth for a full year, but the project must finish in about five weeks. Which factor fails, and what is a sensible fix?

A Ethics: ask every student in the school for consent before measuring the tree
B Time: narrow to something that can be observed within five weeks
C Resources: buy professional lab equipment and growth sensors before starting
D Skills: give up on biology and choose a different subject

4. A student studying engineering wants to test a full-size wind turbine but has no space or budget to build one. What does the lesson suggest?

A Abandon the project, since engineering topics need a full lab
B Broaden the topic to cover all forms of renewable energy instead
C Skip the feasibility check and start building a full-size one straight away
D Adjust the scope or method, e.g. design and test a small model

5. Noor (invented example) narrowed "noise and concentration" to "background noise in our school's study spaces and students' concentration". Which limits did she add?

A Time, method and country
B Group, hypothesis and experiment
C Place, group and aspect
D Place, time and budget

Further reading

- **Research: Where to Begin**, Purdue OWL, Purdue University. Beginner overview of brainstorming, narrowing a topic and phrasing it as a question.
  https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/research_overview/index.html

- **Choose a Research Topic**, Montgomery College Library. A simple step-by-step process for building a topic statement, stressing that research isn't linear.
  https://libguides.montgomerycollege.edu/choose-research-topic
- **Brainstorming**, The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A dozen idea-generating techniques such as freewriting, clustering and journalistic questions.
  https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/brainstorming/
- **Narrowing a Topic Idea**, USC Libraries, University of Southern California. Eight concrete ways to narrow a topic, including by place, time and method.
  https://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/narrowtopic