Open UP Study Skills

Research Proposals

A practical guide

- Essential help for students and researchers
- Basic principles explained
- Clear guidance on what to include
- Key ideas for success

Martyn Denscombe

Appendix 4

CHOOSING A RESEARCH TOPIC

Top tip

Choose a good topic for research – it is important for the success of the proposal.

When it comes to choosing a research topic there are a variety of points from which people can start. Many people find themselves required to undertake a small-scale piece of research, perhaps a research project for a bachelor's or master's degree, without necessarily having in mind a topic they wish to investigate. Faced with the need to conduct a piece of research in a relatively short time and knowing that their work will be formally assessed, choosing a topic for research can pose quite a challenge. For such people the question is: 'How do I decide what topic to research?'

Top tip

Some initial questions to set the ball rolling:
What are my main interests?
Who am I and what principles do I stand for?
What things in my personal and academic background have shaped my beliefs?
Are there any assignments I have done that could be developed into a small-scale research project?

Many others start from a position where they have some rough idea of the kind of thing they would like to research but are not sure exactly what they want to research within that area. The challenge is to fine-tune their interest in a general area – to move it from something vague to something precise. For them the question is: 'How do I select a specific aspect of the topic?'

Top tip

Two ways to narrow the field of choice:

- Use review articles and systematic literature reviews in academic journals to provide signposts about which topics are being discussed and which writers to refer to.
- Look at the titles of projects and dissertations that have been done by students on the programme in previous years. Do not copy any of these, but do use them to get ideas about what kinds of topics would be suitable.

Then there are some who approach research with a very clear and definite vision of the topic they wish to investigate. Experienced researchers who are proposing a piece of research that builds on their previous work will have a clear project in mind, and applicants for a place on a PhD programme are likely to use their master's dissertation as the basis for selecting the subject matter for their research proposal. Practitioners working within an organization might have a specific work-related problem in mind that they wish to tackle. They know in advance what they want to achieve and they are likely to have a pretty good idea of what it will involve. And then there are those people who have a burning desire to investigate a particular topic that is of personal interest – something that ignites their concern or something that they just find fascinating. For such people, there is still a challenge to be faced. For them the question is: 'How do I justify my choice of topic?'

Top tip

The choice of topic must be justified to those who are to evaluate the proposal. Do not presume the readers will share your enthusiasm for your chosen topic. You need to sell them the idea – persuade them that you have made a good choice of topic.

This appendix is of relevance for all of these starting points. This is because it offers guidance that operates on the premise that a 'good' topic is one that

can be 'sold' as an idea. What matters is not what the researcher thinks about the topic. The success of a proposal does not depend on how good the researcher believes the topic to be, but on how well it is justified to the audience of readers who will evaluate the proposal. It is the evaluators' opinions that ultimately count and, bearing in mind the points made in Chapters 2 and 3, this means that any topic that is 'good' must strike the evaluators as being:

- *relevant* (fitting with the remit for the research set by those to whom the proposal will be submitted);
- *worthwhile* (is necessary and offers suitable benefits);
- *feasible* (in terms of scope, available resources, access to data, researcher skills, ethics and legality).

A topic that meets the remit for the work

The vast majority of people who need to choose a topic for research will find that they are not entirely free in their choice. In practice, their choice of topic will need to fit in with the expectations of those who will evaluate the proposal – whether these are supervisors in university departments, representatives of funding bodies, or members of research ethics committees. Students will find that the range of topics from which they can choose will be restricted to those that fit in with the academic department within which they are studying, the programme on which they are enrolled, and possibly the course/module they are taking. Bachelor's degree projects and master's degree dissertations might allow some range of possibilities but they will include boundaries set by the academic discipline of the award for which the work is being produced. Similar restrictions apply in the case of PhD applications and funding applications where the topic that is chosen must fall within certain more or less explicit boundaries based on subject disciplines. So, for example, within a Business School, if a master's degree student proposed to conduct research on 'Styles of management and the success of Premier League sides', this might raise questions about how well it meets the remit for work within the discipline. There is, in effect, an ambiguity to this title. If it means that the research will look at the business side of running a club – finances, administration, organizational structure, human resources, etc. – then this is suitable. If, however, it is concerned with the coaching styles of football managers, it will fall outside the boundaries of what is appropriate for a Business School, and is better suited to a Sports Science Faculty.

Top tip

Ensure that your choice of topic fits well within the requirements of the academic programme, the sponsors, or funding body for whom the proposal is being written.

A topic that can be researched

A topic for research should be something that lends itself to being researched using methods that are conventional within the field of study. Basically, there are certain things that it is not feasible to study using conventional research methods and evaluators will want to know from the start that the questions posed are of a kind that research can answer. The questions need to be answerable in the sense that they rely on the collection and analysis of 'evidence' and on scientific debate and reason. The study cannot be something that relies on judgements or sentiments based on things like religious faith, moral beliefs, political ideology, artistic vision or metaphysics. Table A.1 provides an indication of the difference between those topics that lend themselves to being researched in a conventional sense and those that call for different modes of enquiry.

TABLE A.1 Topics that can and cannot be researched

Not researchable	*Researchable*
Should the UK become a republic? *[This requires a political judgement]*	What would be the constitutional changes needed to make the UK a republic? Is public opinion in favour of retaining the monarchy?
What is the best rock band in the world? *[This is based on an aesthetic judgement and/or emotional feeling]*	What criteria do people use when choosing the best rock band? What is the most popular rock band in the world based on annual earnings from record sales and live performances?
Is euthanasia a good thing? *[This calls for a moral judgement]*	Under what circumstances would members of the public support the practice of euthanasia?

A topic that is legal and ethical

In a free society there should be no topic which, in itself, is illegal to investigate. However, the act of investigating certain topics can easily put the researcher on the wrong side of the law. Research into topics such as terrorism, drug

smuggling, people trafficking, prostitution, and child pornography illustrate the point. It is not against the law to research such topics, and indeed such research is potentially valuable for what it might disclose. And it does not mean that research on such topics must *inevitably* require the researcher to break the law. However, there is a real risk that any empirical research in such areas might end up breaking the law – intentionally or otherwise. Through the activities of gaining access to data sources, in the act of collecting the data, and even in the act of analysing the data, there is the danger of straying outside the bounds of what is within the law. Such topics should be avoided, then, bearing in mind that:

- researchers have no special exemption when it comes to compliance with the law and can be prosecuted if they break the law;
- no university or funding body will accept a research proposal that looks as though it will involve breaking the law.

Top tip

Play safe. Do not choose a topic that might lead you to break the law in the process of collecting or analysing data.

Research activity not only needs to be legal, it also needs to be ethical. When choosing a topic careful consideration should be given to whether it will be possible to adhere to a code of research ethics in the process of collecting and analysing the data and disseminating the findings from the research. Codes of research ethics are based on the principle that participants in research and others directly affected by the research should be treated with respect and that researchers should avoid causing harm as a consequence of their research activity. In practice, this means researchers are expected to:

- avoid undue intrusion – by minimizing inconvenience and taking care not to upset participants or cause them stress;
- protect the interests of participants – in particular, by preventing disclosure of identities, and maintaining the confidentiality of records;
- obtain informed consent from participants;
- avoid any misrepresentation or deception in their dealings with participants.

Top tip

Consider the consequences. When choosing a topic consider the ethical implications of doing the research, in particular the consequences of the research for the participants.

A focused topic with specific aims

The research topic needs to be fairly *specific*. A broad topic might be a good starting point, but it remains too wide-ranging and vague to be a viable focus for a small-scale project. It is vital to focus in on specific aspects, specific questions, specific issues within the broader area of interest. If this is not done, the readers of the proposal are likely to have doubts about (a) whether the ideas for research have been sufficiently developed, or (b) whether the researcher has failed to grasp the scale of the enterprise that is being proposed. Those who evaluate the proposal, as experienced researchers, will probably suspect that any effort to research such a broad area will prove to be unsuccessful because the researcher will inevitably:

- bite off more than he or she can chew;
- flounder in a sea of vast quantities of issues and data;
- waste time on the collection of unnecessary information
- waste time on meanderings up blind alleys before a clear direction becomes evident.

Link up with **Chapter 4: Aims of the Research**

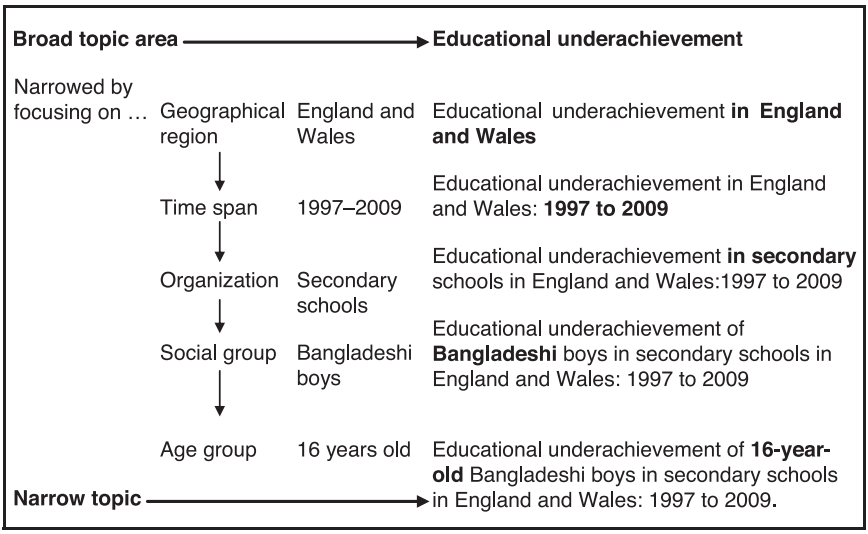
Link up with **Delimitations and scoping the research**, p. 69

Link up with **Chapter 6: Research Questions**

Link up with **Chapter 8: Planning and Resources**

Restricting the scope of a topic can be fairly straightforward. In many cases, it is simply a matter of making explicit some of the assumptions surrounding the chosen topic. The location of the research, for instance, is often left unstated when it actually has a significant bearing on the nature of the proposed research and the applicability of its findings. As the findings from research become globally available through the Internet, it becomes increasingly important to appreciate the need to specify where the research will take place – which country/region, or which organization. The era under investigation, likewise, is easy to overlook when writing about the topic, even though it might actually be the intention of the researcher to focus on certain years as parameters for the research. In social research the age, sex, ethnicity,

FIGURE A.1 Narrowing the topic: an example



and social class of the people being studied are quite common ways in which the broad topic area is made more specific in terms of the actual topic for the proposed piece of research. Figure A.1 shows how this might look in practice.

Personal agenda and self-identity

There is one factor that influences the choice of topic for research that is generally underplayed when it comes to writing the proposal. That is the matter of the researcher's personal agenda and self-interest. In practice, though, this is a very significant factor because it has a bearing on the choice of topic in the large majority of cases.

Of interest to self – a means of personal development

In the first instance, people tend to choose topics that are of interest to themselves. This is quite reasonable when we consider the amount of time that will be spent on the research and the advantages of selecting a topic that can continue to motivate us during the hour upon hour of work that will go into the completion of the research. What we are interested in, of course, is affected by who we are and what we do.

Researcher's social identity – a reflection of personal background and experiences

Within the social sciences in particular, the choice of topic tends to reflect the personal identity and personal background of the researcher. The sex and ethnic background of the researcher, for instance, are likely to have a bearing on the choice of topic. Most research on gender inequality is conducted by women, whereas most research on race prejudice is conducted by ethnic minority researchers. This is no accident, and nor is it necessarily a bad thing. It does not automatically mean that the researcher is taking the easy route by choosing a topic in which they already have some insight, some experience, and some personal interest. On the contrary, it can often be the case that the personal attributes of the researcher can be a positive benefit for the proposed research – qualities that rather than being shunned as subjective and unscientific in relation to the choice of topic should be appreciated as important ingredients for the success of a project

Professional self-interest – a means of career advancement

Self-interest can play a role in the choice of topic such as when people select topics that they can see will have some personal benefit in terms of their employment. The choice of topic can be a strategic one. In the work setting employees can choose a topic mindful of the fact that their research on the topic can provide a practical solution or some other kind of pay-off that can serve them well in their career. The research might, for example, be the basis of a report that will impress the boss.

Interest, involvement, and bias

Self-interest in a topic is no bad thing in its own right. However, there are times when it can become an impediment to good research. A passionate interest in a topic can threaten the prospects of producing an impartial, objective piece of work. The passion felt for the topic might come to stand in the way of the ability to approach the topic in an unbiased manner. The questions the researcher needs to ask are:

- Do I have a vested interest in the findings from the research?
- Will I be able to approach the topic with an open mind?
- Could I incorporate ideas and views I passionately disagree with and be willing and able to consider both sides of the argument?
- Am I too close to the subject, too involved?
- Will my personal values, beliefs, and background lead to biased findings?

- What chance is there that my research will provide a fair and balanced picture?

Caution! Justifying the choice of topic

There is an important point to bear in mind when it comes to justifying the selection of a research topic. In the context of a research proposal, the personal and practical reasons for choosing a particular topic will *not*, of themselves, persuade the readers that the research is worthwhile. In most disciplines, the prevailing sentiment is that research topics should be justified in relation to theoretical developments in the field or practical problems that need a remedy. They are not justified on the basis that the researcher had a personal interest in the topic or that the topic was nice and convenient to study. Although in practice the personal interests of the researcher and the convenience of the topic might have a strong influence on the choice of topic, when justifying the choice of topic in the context of the research proposal the emphasis should be placed firmly on the potential benefits of the research for the likes of theory, knowledge, and practice in the subject area.

The proposal, then, needs to argue a case that there is a need for the particular investigation because, in ways described within the proposal, the research will do one or more of the following:

- fill a gap in what is already known about the topic, perhaps by adding some useful information or by applying current theories and methods in new contexts;
- examine some contradictions that currently exist within theories or data on the topic;
- contribute to a debate or controversy around the topic;
- provide a timely commentary on some significant contemporary issue;
- examine a practical problem, with a view to providing a remedy;
- produce guidelines for good practice.

Top tip

When it comes to justifying a topic for research:

- the way the topic fits with existing research knowledge can be used to persuade the readers that the topic is *worthwhile*;
- the way the topic fits with personal identity and researcher background can be used to persuade the readers of the *feasibility* of the project.

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Research Proposals

A practical guide

"This indispensable guide to writing research proposals takes the reader on a carefully planned journey, which is clearly sign-posted from the outset to the destination of the final proposal … Denscombe demystifies the academic jargon inherent in proposal writing, instilling confidence in all those writing proposals, from undergraduate to doctoral level."
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- Formulating the research question
- Explaining the research methods
- Estimating the costs and planning the time involved
- Obtaining research ethics approval

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Martyn Denscombe is Professor of Social Research at De Montfort University, UK. He is the author of the bestselling book *The Good Research Guide* (Open University Press, 2010) and *Ground Rules for Social Research* (Open University Press, 2009).

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