Planning your research topic

It’s important to choose a topic you care about for your research while also making sure that it’s in an appropriate scope for your project. Topics that are too broad can overwhelm you with irrelevant resources, but if your topic is too narrow you might not have enough material for your paper.

Choose a topic that interests you

*Alternative medicine.*

Try writing your idea as a question

*What is alternative medicine?*

Is your topic too broad?

If your topic is too broad you will end up finding too much information which can make working on your research assignment overwhelming. Sometimes you won’t know if your topic is too broad until you begin your research, so let’s start breaking it down here:

Aspect/Approach

Limit your topic to a particular approach of the issue. Are you interested in the legal, financial, medical, or the psychological aspects of your topic, for example?

*Should health insurance companies pay for more alternative medical treatments?*

Population/Group

Try limiting your topic to a specific population. These can include age groups, ethnic groups, or gender, for example.

*Should acupuncture be offered a part of the treatment plan for people who suffer from anxiety?*
Time

Are you interested in a specific time period?

*At what point in time did alternative medicine become “alternative”?*

Geography

Maybe you are interested in exploring an issue just in the US or only in Arizona.

*How is alternative medicine practiced in Sonora, Mexico vs. in Arizona?*

Is your topic too narrow?

If you can answer your research question in a single sentence, or if your topic is something very recent or local, you might not find enough information to develop a complete research paper. Try thinking about what questions you still have as you are when doing some preliminary reading. You can look for background information on related ideas or expand the way you’re approaching your topic to get to a more generalized research question. For example, if your research topic focuses on Tucson try expanding it to the Southwest.

Your revised question

Take a look at the different questions that you developed. You can take one of the ones you have listed, or combine elements from any or all of the questions until you have a topic that you’d like to research.

*What types of alternative medical treatments are currently practiced on the Arizona / Mexico border to treat anxiety or other mood disorders?*
Select keywords and synonyms

Choose some keywords from your question and write related words you can try if your keywords aren’t working. Use these words when searching for materials on your topic.

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<tr>
<th>Keyword</th>
<th>Synonym</th>
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<td>Alternative medicine Holistic medicine</td>
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Start looking for resources

Starting out with a focused research question can help make sure you find materials to get you started. As you begin looking for articles, books, or other materials on your topic, your research question is likely to shift. The research process is never a straight path. Keep an open mind, and don’t be surprised if you need to adapt your topic based on the resources you discover.

Background information

To find background information on your topic look at:

- News sites and news databases
- CQ Researcher
- Encyclopedia articles
- Academic Search Complete

Subject-specific sources

- Look at the databases by subject on the UA Libraries website
- Ask your librarian (http://ask.library.arizona.edu/)
- Locate the subject guide that most relates to your topic
As you proceed with your search, think about what aspects of your topic are new and interesting and pay attention to the words that people are using to discuss your topic. You can use these words to continue moving your search and your topic forward. Remember, this is the beginning of the research process, not just the end of a worksheet, so have fun with this exploration!

Adapted from:
- http://info-skills.lib.vt.edu/choosing_focusing/10.html
- http://www.esc.edu/online-writing-center/exercise-room/research-question-broad-or-narrow/
- http://libguides.mit.edu/select-topic