

Narrowing a Topic

Learning Outcomes

- Students will learn to ask questions about a topic to identify subdivisions of that topic.
- Students will learn to seek background information on a topic to identify subdivisions of that topic.
- Students will learn how to formulate a research question from a narrowed topic.

Part 1

Think of a general subject or topic you are interested in researching. Begin by answering the following questions:

What dates do you want to consider? Do you want to investigate a range of dates? Do you want to compare one date with another date?

Whose life do you want to consider? What ages do you want to research? (e.g., only males, only females, early childhood, older adults, everyone)?

Do you want to consider the interactions between groups (e.g., student athletes and non-student athletes, parents and children, etc.)?

How do you define your topic, idea, or subject area? Are there different varieties or types (e.g., cyber bullying, school bullying, gay/trans bullying, etc.)?

How long is your paper supposed to be (e.g. ten pages)?

What kinds of sources are you required to use (e.g., primary or secondary, scholarly)? Is there any type of source you may not use?

Part 2

Encyclopedias give information about subjects or topics. When looking for ideas about how to outline or map a topic, it's often useful to go to an encyclopedia article and see how the article is subdivided. What topics are covered in the article? *Wikipedia*

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bullying#School_bullying_\(bullying_of_students_in_schools\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bullying#School_bullying_(bullying_of_students_in_schools)))

breaks up the article about Bullying like this:

- 1 Definition
- 2 Types
 - 2.1 Individual
 - 2.2 Collective
- 3 Characteristics
 - 3.1 Of bullies and accomplices
 - 3.2 Of typical bystanders
 - 3.3 Of victims
- 4 Effects
 - 4.1 Suicide
 - 4.2 Positive development
- 5 Dark triad
- 6 Projection
- 7 Emotional intelligence
- 8 Context
 - 8.1 Cyberbullying
 - 8.2 Disability bullying
 - 8.3 Gay bullying
 - 8.4 Legal bullying
 - 8.5 Military bullying
 - 8.6 Parental bullying of children
 - 8.7 Prison bullying
 - 8.8 School bullying (bullying of students in schools)
 - 8.9 Sexual bullying
 - 8.10 Trans bullying
 - 8.11 Workplace bullying
 - 8.12 In other areas
 - 8.13 Inanimate objects
- 9 Prevention
- 10 Responding to bullying

Use a general encyclopedia to look up your general topic. (e.g., Credo Reference <https://bit.ly/2tXkLFw>, Gale Virtual Reference Library <https://bit.ly/2vExg9K>, etc.) Examine the article about your topic. **List the headings and subheadings in the article.** Identify subheadings that are of interest to you. Check the end of the article for any citations to other books, articles, and the like about your area of interest. Ask yourself questions about what might be missing or incomplete. Are there other aspects of your topic that don't seem to be covered in the encyclopedia article? Are there links between items on the outline that bear further investigation?

Advanced students might want to look at an article on the same topic in a *subject-specific encyclopedia*. An encyclopedia of Education, for example, would have more in-depth information about bullying in schools. Again, locate the article and identify and mark subheadings that are of interest. Check the end of the article for further reading suggestions.

Part 3

After thinking about and deciding what you are interested in writing about your topic, try putting a research question into words. Select two topics or subtopics and write a possible research question that links the two ideas. For example, if you are interested in cyberbullying, you might take the headings “cyberbullying” and “girls” to pose the question, “How does social media use by girls in Middle School contribute to cyberbullying?” If your interest is in parental/authoritative supervision and bullying you might take the headings “school bullying” and “parental/authoritative supervision” and pose a question such as “What role does parental/authoritative supervision of children have on school bullying of middle school girls?” Notice that these questions cannot be answered yes or no.

Turn Your Topic Into Keywords

Example Research Question: What is the relationship between test performance and the retention of ESL students?

Example Research Question Keywords: *test performance, retention, ESL students*

Write your thesis/question: _____

Identify keywords: _____



Avoid Abstract or Implied Concepts



Because the databases search for the exact words that you enter, certain types of words can be unhelpful to include in your search. These include:

relationship words: words that get at the relationship between two topics
examples: compare, contrast, correlation, causation, relationship

judgment words: words that judge something to be better or worse than something else
examples: best, worst, pro, con, advantages, disadvantages

There are many ways these ideas can be expressed or even implied. Using these words in your searches may exclude relevant articles on your topic simply because they don't include the exact word that you entered. By leaving out these words, you allow the database to find all of the articles on your main topics, which you can then evaluate to see if they fit your needs.

Synonyms & Antonyms

Synonyms are words that have the same or similar meaning. Antonyms are words that have the opposite meaning. Both can be helpful when trying to determine relevant keywords for your research topic.

Some topics have many different terms that can be used to describe them. For example, here are some additional keywords that could be used for *test performance*:

- Tests
- Exams
- Test-Taking Skill
- Test Anxiety
- Academic Achievement
- Test Preparation

Sometimes when you are researching a specific topic, it can also be helpful to search for the opposite of your topic. For example, if you are interested in student retention, you'll also want to look at student dropouts. Here are some possible synonyms and antonyms for student retention:

- Student Persistence
- Graduation
- Dropouts
- School Holding Power
- Student Attrition
- Dropout Prevention

Database Smorgasbord

Learning Outcomes

- Students will learn that different databases cover different subjects and different sources.
- Student will learn to consider and select appropriate databases for their research subject.

Instructions

Start at the library home page. (www.tamtu.edu/library) Find the link on the library home page that will take you to the list of databases available. (Look under the Research tab)

How are the databases listed (e.g., alphabetically, by subject, by discipline, etc.)?

Read the description for a *general* or *interdisciplinary* database under “Databases A-Z”

What topics are covered?

Read the description for a *subject-specific* database.

What topics are covered?

If you were looking for general information to get started on a topic, which database might be more useful to you?

If you wanted information specific to your topic, which database might be more useful to you?

Click on the link for a general database. Click on the link that shows the titles of the publications included in the database.

What kinds of publications (e.g., newspapers, magazines, journals, book chapters, etc.) are included?

Click on the link for a subject-specific database. Click on the link that shows the titles of the publications included in the database.

What kind of publications are included?

Do a search for a topic in a general database.

How many results did you get?

How many of the results on the first page are relevant to what you were looking for?

Do the same search in an appropriate subject-specific database.

How many results did you get?

How many of the results on the first page are relevant to what you were looking for?

When would you use a general database?

When would you use a subject-specific database?