Narrowing a Topic and Developing a Research Question

Narrowing a Topic
You may not know right away what your research question is. Gather information on the broader topic to explore new possibilities and to help narrow your topic.

- **Choose an interesting topic.** If you’re interested in your topic, chances are that others will be, too. Plus researching will be a lot more fun!
- **Gather background information.**
  - For a general overview, *reference sources* may be useful.
  - The search engine, *Jacket Search* is the best place to start narrowing your focus and finding resources (library.defiance.edu).
  - Ask yourself:
    - What subtopics relate to the broader topic?
    - What questions do these sources raise?
    - What do you find interesting about the topic?
  - Consider your audience. Who would be interested in the issue?

Reference Sources
Reference sources are a great place to begin your research. They provide:
- a way to identify potential research topics.
- an introduction to gather information on your topic.
- key authors in your area of research.

General Reference Sources
Dictionaries and encyclopedias provide general information about a variety of subjects. They also include definitions that may help you break down and better understand your topic. They are generally not cited, since they mainly give an overview of a topic.

From Topic to Research Question
After choosing a topic and gathering background information, add focus with a research question.

- **Explore questions.**
  - Ask open-ended “how” and “why” questions about your general topic.
  - Consider the “so what” of your topic. Why does this topic matter to you? Why should it matter to others?
  - Reflect on the questions you have considered. Identify one or two questions you find engaging and which could be explored further through research.

- **Determine and evaluate your research question.**
  - What aspect of the more general topic you will explore?
  - Is your research question clear?
  - Is your research question focused? (Research questions must be specific enough to be well covered in the space available.)
  - Is your research question complex? (Questions shouldn’t have a simple yes/no answer and should require research and analysis.)

- **Hypothesize.** After you’ve come up with a question, consider the path your answer might take.
  - If you are making an argument, what will you say?
  - Why does your argument matter?
  - How might others challenge your argument?
  - What kind of sources will you need to support your argument?

Sample Research Questions

**Clarity**
*Unclear:* Why are social networking sites harmful?
*Clear:* How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook?

**Focused**
*Unfocused:* What is the effect on the environment from global warming?
*Focused:* How is glacial melting affecting penguins in Antarctica?

**Simple vs. Complex**
*Too simple:* How are doctors addressing diabetes in the U.S.?
* Appropriately complex:* What are common traits of those suffering from diabetes in America, and how can these commonalities be used to aid the medical community in prevention of the disease?

Adapted from Indiana University’s Library – retrieved from:
https://libraries.indiana.edu/sites/default/files/Develop_a_Research_Question.pdf