

CSC: CoR: Chapter 3: From Topics to Questions

The 10 **salient sentence strings** presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

Ten Salient Sentence Strings

1. As you begin a research project, you will want to distinguish a topic from a subject. A subject is a broad area of knowledge (e.g., climate change), while a topic is a specific interest within that area (e.g., the effect of climate change on migratory birds). However, finding a topic is not simply a matter of narrowing your subject. A topic is an approach to a subject, one that asks a *question* whose answer solves a *problem* that your readers care about.
2. That's how a lot of research begins— not with a big question that attracts everyone in a field, but with a mental itch about a small question that only a single researcher wants to scratch. If you feel that itch, start scratching. But at some point, you must decide whether the answer to your question solves a problem significant to some community of researchers or even to a public whose lives your research could change.
3. [...] a research topic is an interest stated specifically enough for you to imagine *becoming* a local expert on it. That doesn't mean you already know a lot about it or that you'll have to know more about it than others, including your teacher. You just want to know a lot more about it than you do now.
4. [Research topics can be narrowed down] by adding words and phrases, but of a special kind: *conflict*, *description*, *contribution*, and *developing*. Those nouns are derived from verbs expressing actions or relationships: *to conflict*, *to describe*, *to contribute*, and *to develop*. Lacking such "action" words, your topic is a static thing.
5. Once they have a focused topic, many new researchers make a beginner's mistake: they immediately start plowing through all the sources they can find on the topic, taking notes on everything they read. [...] But in *any* college course, such a report falls short if it is seen as just a pastiche of vaguely related facts. If a writer asks no specific *question* worth asking, he can offer no specific *answer* worth supporting. And without an answer to support, he cannot *select* from all the data he could find on a topic just those relevant to his answer.
6. Serious researchers, however, do not document information for its own sake, but to support the answer to a question that they (and they hope their readers) think is worth asking. So the best way to begin working on your focused topic is not to find all the information you can on it, but to formulate questions that direct you to just that information you need to answer them. Start with the standard journalistic questions: *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*, but focus on *how* and *why*.
7. To engage your best critical thinking, systematically ask questions about your topic's history, composition, and categories. Then ask any other question you can think of or find in your sources. Record all the questions, but don't stop to answer them even

when one or two grab your attention. This inventory of possible questions will help to direct your search activities and enable you to make sense of information you find. (Don't worry about keeping these categories straight; their only purpose is to stimulate questions and organize your answers.)

8. After asking all the questions you can think of, evaluate them, because not all questions are equally good. Look for questions whose answers might make you (and, ideally, your readers) think about your topic in a new way. Avoid questions [... whose] answers are settled fact that you could just look up, [... whose] answers would be merely speculative, and [... whose] answers are dead ends.
9. [...] Once you have a question that holds your interest, you must pose a tougher one about it: *So what?* Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking? You might not be able to answer that *So what?* question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.
10. But many researchers, including at times the five of us, find that they can't flesh out the last step in that three-part sentence until they finish a first draft. So you make no mistake *beginning* your research without a good answer to that third question— *Why does this matter?*— but you face a problem when you *finish* your research without having thought through those three steps at all. And if you are doing advanced research, you *must* take that step, because answering that last question is your ticket into the conversation of your community of researchers.