

NARROWING THE FIELD: TIPS ON CHOOSING YOUR TOPIC

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Unless you're one of the lucky ones who enters graduate school with a dissertation topic fully formed in your mind, you're going to need some strategies for making this critical decision.

We talked to students and to staff members at the Counseling Center about how people choose dissertation and thesis topics. Here are some of the answers:

Start With an Open Mind. Strangely enough, the best way to narrow down the choices is to keep your mind open to all the possibilities.

"I think it's nice to have that sort of freedom...just to be open to taking classes, seeing what people are doing, and not feeling like you always have to think about what the dissertation topic is going to be," says David Schenker, fourth-year Classics student.

According to JoEllen Green, fourth-year student in English, coursework doesn't always lead to an easy choice. She says, "Our coursework is meant to be a broad coverage. You do your narrowing down stuff during the last semester of your coursework, in orals preparation."

Your topic may come out of class discussions, your master's thesis, reading for orals, or a chance remark overheard on BART. If you aren't listening, you might miss it.

Leave yourself open for a suggestion from another student or from a professor. Consider all the possibilities; then work from the many to the few, eliminating alternatives until you end up with the best topic for you.

Read in Your Field. You're probably doing this anyway, but if not, read everything you can find. You'll not only turn up possible topics, but you'll also find out what's already written on those topics. Look for hints that the acknowledged expert in the field is already doing research on your favorite poem or microbe. Otherwise, you might find yourself shut out of a topic in three years.

Reading will show you where you can make an "original contribution." At the same time, you'll be compiling your bibliography painlessly.

Talk to Professors. They can steer you away from fatal errors, such as picking a country you can't get into, or working in a field that's political suicide for jobseekers.

"I wanted to do research in America, but the professors steered me toward the foreign direction. They said it would be better for my career if I did my dissertation work abroad, and then I could always work later in the States," says Marcia Inhorn Millar, fourth-year Anthropology student.

A professor may, of course, suggest a topic that you immediately love. If so, you'll be ahead of the game, because you'll know you can get faculty support when you need it.

Talking to professors will also give you an idea of their personalities. Let's face it, you need an adviser you can work with. Attend their office hours and find out what they're interested

in, whether they have time for new projects, and whether they seem interested in topics you're considering. If not, they may suggest an alternative or steer you toward another faculty member.

Talk to Other Students. Don't worry about someone stealing your ideas. As JoEllen Green puts it, "what's really interesting is your own reading of the situation, and even if you tell someone your idea they couldn't do anything with it. In English we have study groups for orals and that's where you really refine and hone your idea."

More experienced students can tell you whether a topic you're considering is feasible; or whether the adviser who champions that field is impossible; or what it was like trying to narrow down the question in a new, uncharted area of research. Listening to their war stories may give you a better idea of how the process works in your department, as well as how to manage your own time for the next several years.

Think About Your Job Experience. If you've been out in the world, you may have developed skill and experience in a particular area already. You probably know what burning questions need answers in your own subdiscipline. If you're in a field placement, your choice of topic may depend on the support you can get.

David Melnick, who received his master's in Social Welfare last year, says that most Social Welfare students work on thesis research with the agencies they're placed in for field work. They've already chosen one of four specialties when they arrive in the School, and they usually conduct research in that specialty, based on what their agencies want done. The agencies may offer help in the form of ready-made samples, financial assistance, or people to conduct surveys.

Take Another Look Around the Department. Is there a professor with whom you feel especially compatible, who could be your adviser? Investigate his or her special interest and you may come up with a topic. Is the department lounge buzzing with talk about the latest trendy research? Maybe you can find an offshoot of that topic (or maybe you should run in the opposite direction).

Look at the research already going on. Dan Carl, a first-year student in Chemical Engineering, says that "the people in your group are definitely going to be the major source of information. You can see how (their research) was presented, how they handled it, what questions were asked, the broad base."

"You should do some preliminary sleuthing," says Millar. "You have to take the initiative and do some investigation of what's already been written and who can work with you, as well as any possible tactical problems such as special skills you'll need."

When Nothing Else Works, Write. At a certain point students may experience the equivalent of writer's block. They simply cannot make a decision about the thesis or dissertation topic.

Whether the logjam results from fear of failing or fear of finishing, the counselors and students we talked to had some suggestions for moving ahead.

- *Trick Yourself Into Getting Started.* JoEllen Green says students in English often have trouble writing the dissertation prospectus because they've just finished with orals. She recommends some of the tricks that writing instructors teach: free association, filling out grant applications, and anything that "gets you writing."
- *Write Your Proposal Out Loud.* Robert Mixson suggests talking about your topic if you can't get yourself to write it up in a proposal. Talking to another student helps you explore the issues; if you tape your conversation, you'll have a start on the written proposal (after you transcribe the tape, that is).
- *Work on Your Writing Skills.* Taking a writing course is another way to get yourself started. Carol Morrison finds that some students reach graduate school without knowing how to organize a thesis. A good composition course will give you the basics and you'll have to start writing to complete the assignments.
- *Get Feedback From Others.* Marcia Millar agrees that writing forces you to focus on your topic. She wrote an initial prospectus and gave it to her committee; their feedback helped her see that her approach was too narrow and she needed to add methodology.
- *Plan for Orals.* If your department requires you to defend your topic in qualifying exams, then you have a built-in mechanism for making a decision. Dan Carl likes this method; he says, "it really forces you to devote an inordinate amount of time to planning and thinking and trying to cover all the bases. I don't think most people do that until they get into a position that is forcing them to do it."
- *Start with Mechanical Tasks.* Getting started on your bibliography can also help you narrow the topic down. You not only find out what's been written already; according to Robert Mixson, spending time on mechanical tasks can help you feel you've accomplished something. It may also spark the idea you've been waiting for.
- *Check Your Motives.* Carol Morrison suggests taking a look to see whether you're stuck because of an emotional block. She says, "It's important to be aware that you could be discarding topic after topic as a way to keep yourself from moving forward." If you think you might fit this description, a visit to the Counseling Center may do wonders.
- *Last But Not Least.* JoEllen Green has one other suggestion for getting off the dime: "Visit your adviser and let her (or him) yell at you."

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF ABOUT YOUR TOPIC

- Is the topic too easy? Will it challenge me to serious research that will be respected as a significant contribution to my field?
- Is the topic too complicated? Will I be able to finish the research before my funding runs out?
- Is my topic germane to the theoretical issues my department considers important?
- Will the topic answer a question that's currently being debated, or will it add to the general body of knowledge?
- Do I need financial support and if so, can I get it from department funding or outside agencies?
- Can I articulate the topic in a way that makes sense for oral exams or for funding proposals?
- Is there an adviser I can count on and a committee I can work with? Can I combine the pet topic of one professor with the theoretical approach of another to put together a committee?
- Will I have the resources I need (laboratory, computer, library)?
- Can I find a sample group and get access to them?
- Has anyone else recently published on the subject? Is there a body of literature I can use to get started?
- Will I need to publish it before I graduate? Can I turn it into a book later?
- Will I need some knowledge I don't have yet (language, statistics, etc.)?
- Will I be bored with the topic in five years, or ten, or twenty?