

Doing a Research Project

Picking a Topic

It's a big project, so pick something you care about and want to be "yours," such as:

- An old cause of yours;
- A cause you would like to deal with as a lawyer; or
- Something you puzzle over and can't explain.

Got an Idea? Check It Out

- 1) Is it feasible?
- 2) Is it just another “dead horse?”
- 3) Is it more than an encyclopedia entry?

1) Is it feasible?

- Is it feasible for you to do it now, here, with the time and resources you have?
- Are the necessary data available around here? Is they available to you?
- Are there people who will talk to you near here?
- Is it small enough for you to do a thorough job this semester with all your other courses?

2) Is it just another “dead horse?”

- Do you have a chance to say something new and interesting, or has this been done and done? If it’s “popular,” do you have a new take on it? Check out what others have researched and said. Cut yourself a new piece.

3) Is it more than an encyclopedia entry?

- A scholarly research project is not just the who, what, when, where of an encyclopedia article. **It's about why and how. Cause and effect!**

Put It Together Before You Start

- 1) Draft an “If-then” statement ...
- 2) Make sure you are able to and do define your terms.
- 3) Summarize what happened / what you are studying in “25 words or less.”
- 4) How do you think your ideas and research relate to others’ theories about this or comparable events or cases?

The Data Dilemmas

What kinds of data should you collect or use?

Data, Data, and More Data

Documents

- Secondary sources – a journalist's or scholar's – on what happened and why.
- Primary sources – players' memoirs, statistical data, legal briefs, government officials' reports.
- Always remember, just because it is in print does not make it true. You have to judge these sources – can you believe their versions of events, or are you reading what they defined their own way? Or, is this data useful as a way to show the sides' positions?

Interviews

- Asking the players what they did and what they thought is important for most people's research on contemporary topics.
- To do it, you need to be clear who the players are.
- You need to ask your questions in their language.
- You need to formulate the questions so that you get answers relevant to your issue.
- **But**, you need say them in such a way that the interviewee does not know your bias.

Surveys

- Ask a lot of people the same or similar questions. Most surveys are about:
 - Who they are.
 - What they did.
 - What they thought.

Open-Ended Surveys

- Ask general questions, and let the subjects tell their own stories or give their opinions in their own words.
- You have to make sure the questions are understandable and answerable for your subjects.
- You probably have to do this by going out and meeting with them. Few people will take the time to write you long answers.
- These are hard to “collate” and make use of the data other than by quoting the juicy parts.

Closed-Ended Surveys

- Not only are there questions, but the answers are pre-stated.
- For questions of opinion about who people are and what they have done.
- Before you ask the questions, try them out. Are they understandable; and do your answers cover all the possible options without pre-judging by their wording or their order?
- These are easy to compare, but you have to be sure they reflect people's answers and are not leading or just your answers.

Participant Observation

- Being part of the story, hanging around and watching what happens.
- Thermometer effect (problem for all research but worst for participant observers): Once you put yourself and your questions in place, people see things and act differently.
- Make sure you are sensitive to what happens, where, and how it looks. Think carefully about what all this means.

Games and Simulations

- Creating a laboratory and making things happen.
- Pretty unreal but good ways to put things in stark relief.



Research Cautions

Human Subjects Approval

Institutional Board that decides if your research is “safe” for your subjects. Get the approval before you start.

Thermometer Effect . . .

- “If someone cares, this must be important.”
- “He asked, therefore it is...”

Promises to Sources:
Watch what you
promise! What you say
is what you do!

- Write a clear statement to present your research to your sources – tell them what may or may not happen as a result.
- Decide whether you will need to promise your sources anonymity.
- If you promise them anonymity, **Do not** violate your promise.
- Plan ahead about how you are going to protect your sources and still make your research credible.

Putting It All Together and Getting An Answer

- Take a breath and the time to think about what you have found out.
- Review your initial hypothesis: Is it right or wrong? Do you have better explanation after all your research? Or, did you find something more interesting that you can document?

Step II: Putting It Together

- Introduction: Lay out the basics of the case/events you studied and your hypothesis. Be clear about why all this is important!
- Literature Review: What have others said about this or comparable cases and how are your conclusions different and better?

Step III: The Body

- Then (or in an appendix), tell what your data base is and how you did your research so it is valid and reliable.
- Make your case:
 - Define your terms
 - Tell what you found about X and Y and how the cause and effect work. **BUILD WITH YOUR DATA, DON'T JUST CONTEND!**
 - (As you do it, think of the other explanations and make sure that your data disproves them but don't go off on discussing them ... Stay focused, just cover the objections.)

Step IV: The End

- Summarize your hypothesis and conclusion.
- Remind the reader why all this is important in the Big World and what it says about events beyond your own research focus. Where can it be applied?

WARNING

- Make sure you have documented all your data with footnotes.
- Don't forget to do a full bibliography.