

# DEVELOPING RESEARCH TOPICS

*A guide to selecting topics for papers and speeches and beginning research*

When you have a research project, such as a paper or speech or class presentation, you may have to develop your own topic or be given a general one. In either case, the sooner you decide on a specific topic, the quicker you can focus your research and get to actually writing. It may sound contradictory, but a specific topic is easier to research because you won't have to plow through huge piles of general information.

## **If you need help choosing a topic**

If you don't have a good idea for a topic, talk to the librarians. They can show you some sources that help generate ideas that you can turn into research topics.

Sources that are frequently useful:

- *CQ Researcher* (Ref H35 .E55) A weekly publication shelved in the reference area of the library covering all sorts of topics, although most relate to social issues. The back of each issue lists topics covered for the past several months. When you see one you like, go to that issue and decide if the topic is good. This can also be a source you use in your project.

*CQ Researcher* is also available to ACC students online at [alicat.austincc.edu/search/v?e-resources+C](http://alicat.austincc.edu/search/v?e-resources+C).

To access from off campus, you will use your ACCeID to log in.

- *10,000 Ideas for Term Papers, Projects, and Reports* (Ref LB1047.3 .L35) not at all campuses

- *Current Controversies* (Call numbers vary)  
A series of books on over 50 different topics such as hate crimes, pollution, and censorship. Availability varies by campus. Check the ACC Library catalog ([alicat.austincc.edu](http://alicat.austincc.edu)).

- A general interest magazine, such as *Newsweek*, or a web site like CNN.com can show you lots of topics.

Once you have a general topic, develop it by using the chart technique explained below.

## **If you have a general topic**

Sometimes you already have a broad topic, such as —Animal Behavior|| or —America in the 1920s.|| These are too general; there is too much information. Try the chart technique, below, to focus your topic.

## **Developing a topic**

If you already have a good background in your general topic, you can start on the chart below, but usually it's worth scanning an encyclopedia or textbook to pick up keywords and important ideas, people, dates, etc. The more ideas you can put in the chart, the easier it will be to select a topic.

Don't worry about the ideas you write down being —good|| or —correct|| or about exactly where you put them on the chart. Let your imagination go.

### **Topic: The American Civil War**

General subject areas	Where	Who	When	Other
Military	U.S.	Yankees		Cotton
Politics	North	Confederates	1860s	Emancipation
Economy	South	Slaves	Pre-war	Proclamation
Morality	Texas	Abolitionists	Reconstruction	Juneteenth
Social Impact		Lincoln		

After filling this out, pick ideas from one or more columns and put them together. Usually you can come up with several approaches, such as:

- What was Texas' role in the military aspects of the Civil War?||
- How did abolitionists affect politics in the North?||
- How the end of slavery changed the Southern economy.||

Usually topics evolve as the research shows you more aspects, but this technique should get you started.

Here's a blank form for you to use.

**Topic:**

General subject areas	Where	Who	When	Other

Possible specific topics:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

### ***Pick an approach to your topic***

After you decide on a topic, how should you undertake the research process? It often depends on the assignment. Research projects usually have one of these approaches:

1. Factual or Referential – This can be a summary of others' research or an explanation of a process.
  - Current theories on the causes of ozone depletion
  - How stocks are bought and sold
2. Interpretive or Persuasive – Factual information is used as evidence, but your opinions and analysis are the ultimate point.
  - Government inaction on controlling ozone depletion
  - Insider trading is destroying the stock market
 Be sure you understand which approach should be emphasized in your project.

### ***Focus the research on your topic***

There are different types of information. You probably will need a combination, but look over the categories below and decide where to focus your energies. Obviously, a two-minute speech will require a different emphasis than a 10-page paper.

**Background** – You may have already looked at some general information sources in filling out the chart above, but if you didn't it often saves time in the long run to look at an encyclopedia article on your topic. Major ideas and facts will be given, and when you look at more specific sources later, you will have a better understanding of which ones are more significant. Librarians know good sources of background material for topics, so ask.

**Hard facts** – Any research project is stronger if hard facts—statistics, formulas, budget figures, etc.—are included. Reference sources (both books and on-line) are the most likely places to locate these (although they will show up in almost all sources). There are so many sources of facts, it's easiest to ask the librarians for guidance in selecting useful ones .

### **Opinion/Current events/Local issues/Specific topics –**

Although these are totally separate concerns, they are most likely to show up in the same places: periodical articles and the World Wide Web. These sources are quickly updated and often focus on specific places and issues. Individual opinions are often stressed, whereas other sources usually have a broader perspective. (See the study guide –Finding Periodical Articles for help.)

**In-depth information** – For projects that require a deeper knowledge of a topic, books and scholarly journals are generally the best sources. They are longer than the sources listed above, and they are usually written by experts. (See the study guides –Finding Books and –Finding Periodical Articles.)

### ***An example of focusing research***

- You use the chart technique to focus the general topic of –U.S. foreign policy down to –U.S. relations with Mexico in the 20th century.
- For background, the librarian shows you an article in the *Encyclopedia of American Foreign Policy* covering Mexico. You note keywords and major events and people.
- You check the library catalog and indexes to periodical articles and see there are dozens of sources. You decide you need to be even more specific, so you narrow your topic to –U.S. economic relations with Mexico since World War II.
- You check out a couple of books on U.S.-Mexico relations and read the chapters that have in-depth information on economic relations. You find several recent articles that update what was covered in the books. Some of the articles focus on the topic from the perspective of Texas and Austin. You find Internet sites in Mexico that discuss the issue from their perspective.
- You get an A+ and an offer of a full scholarship to the university of your choice. Eventually you are appointed ambassador to Mexico and receive the Nobel Prize for Peace.