

Title of Module: The Scope of Research Questions and Conversations

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Video 1: Introduction and Evaluating Initial Questions

Introduction to Module

This module will introduce strategies that will help you midway through your research process. You will learn approaches for evaluating and revising research questions, and skills that will help you to enter an intellectual conversation through your research by working with search results and sources. Although you may watch this module and the other module focused on research in a linear fashion, you are welcome to return to various points in the videos at any time you think it will be useful.

Different Questions Serve Different Functions

Some of the early questions you ask yourself to shape initial research may have fairly simple factual answers, but questions of this kind do not make good research questions.

For example, when you want to confirm basic facts about a subject, questions that would yield yes or no as an answer are fine, but questions with these structures do not work well as research questions because they cannot lead you to strong claims. As you read and evaluate sources and develop more knowledge, you will be able to use initial questions to develop specific research questions that can lead you to a claim.

Potential Research Questions to Avoid or Revise

There are some specific types of questions that you should avoid or revise in order to develop strong research questions. Avoid or revise questions that fit any of these criteria:

They yield simple yes or no responses (these questions often begin with do/does/did or is/are/was)

They oversimplify or over-generalize about a specific group or abstract concept

They do not have a specific timeframe

The answer is a matter of personal opinion or taste

The answer would be extremely general or vague

You can find the answer easily by looking up a few facts

No relevant factual data exists that could support your answer

No one would or could disagree with your answer

No one could disprove the answer because it seems self-evident

Strategies for Narrowing Research Questions

Sometimes, you may have to revise a research question by giving it a broader focus. Much more often as your knowledge about a topic grows, you will need to narrow the scope of your questions by limiting the issues they address. To narrow your research question, you can focus on a more specific aspect of an exhibit, the central text or object you analyze or interpret in a paper. Other strategies for narrowing research questions include establishing a more specific time frame, cultural context, or geographical context, and responding to a more specific debate or part of a debate.

When revising research questions to be more specific, you should also ask yourself why your question and the answer to it (your claim) matters. For many projects, you will likely move through this process more than once. You will start with a general question, narrow the scope of that question, consider its significance, and then often realize that you need to make your question even more specific. In most cases when you make your question more specific, the potential significance of that question will shift as well. You will have a stronger question, claim, and argument if you pay attention to how the significance of your project is evolving.

Video 2: Search Results and the Scope of the Conversation

Entering the Research Conversation

Like most arguments, in addition to considering the scope of your particular research question and claim, developing a strong research paper involves considering the scope of the conversation you want to join. Each day, most of us have conversations with friends and with strangers to share ideas or understand particular situations. Scholars, public intellectuals,

journalists, activists, and others also engage in conversations with each other in order to debate complex scientific, artistic, and social issues.

Although many intellectual conversations happen through the writing of articles and books rather than through talking, they share many qualities with daily conversations, including participants acknowledging others' views and sharing contrasting perspectives. Like daily conversations, intellectual conversations are often attempts to create collective understandings of a particular situation or issue.

These intellectual conversations are exciting debates in which you can play a role through your research and writing. Just because you are still a student does not mean that you cannot make a unique and relevant contribution by searching for these conversations and responding to their ideas through your analysis of specific exhibits.

Entering an intellectual conversation when using just a few sources provided by your professor is challenging, but for many research projects, you need to use your search results - articles, books, and other sources - to find and choose a conversation to join. As you move through your research and drafting process, you will often need to adjust the range of the conversation in which you take part as you also make your research question and claim more specific. The goal is to create an argument that connects to existing ideas in a conversation, but that challenges and expands our understanding of that conversation's central issues.

Potential Search Results and Conversations

In some cases, the conversation to enter may seem fairly obvious even when you are conducting research for outside sources. After typing a range of search terms into the BU library search and multiple databases, you may find that there are a manageable number of peer-reviewed articles that analyze this exhibit as part of a single intellectual conversation. This debate may be a conversation to which you feel you can contribute something new. However, more often, you find one of two situations – a huge number of scholarly sources and a large number of conversations about your exhibit among those sources, or no scholarly sources that analyze your exhibit.

Finding Too Many or Too Few Conversations

If you find too many possible sources, you will need to decide which specific conversation you want to join. Finding conversations starts with individual sources. Choose a source that seems interesting and skim it to see if you want to respond to it. If it seems promising, look at its in-text citations and works cited, bibliography, or references section to discover other sources participating in a particular conversation. Sometimes, you can find many of the sources you need in the bibliography of one of the individual sources you look at, because that source happens to be responding to many key points in a particular conversation. In other situations, sources may not be at the center of the conversation you want to join themselves, but they may refer to other sources that will have more helpful bibliographies.

Potential sources also help you to build the vocabulary you need to find further sources taking part in a conversation. Particular conversations often use special vocabulary that will probably be unfamiliar to you at the beginning of your research process. Once you learn these key words, you can then refine your searches to find other sources that are part of the specific conversation in which you want to participate. Learning these specialized terms will also be important to writing a strong argument that demonstrates an understanding of the existing conversation in order to expand it in meaningful and compelling ways.

But what if you cannot find any scholarly sources or conversations that analyze your exhibit? If you face this situation, it does not mean that you cannot write about that exhibit. You need to find another potential conversation into which an analysis of this exhibit can fit. Some questions that may help you find this other conversation include –
What genre is your exhibit and what conversations exist about features of that genre or other examples of that genre? What social or scientific issues does your exhibit explore and what conversations exist about those issues? Who is the creator of your exhibit and what conversations exist about his or her other work? What cultural traditions does your exhibit respond to and what are some current conversations about related cultural traditions?

Video 3: Joining and Creating Conversations

Conversations and Arguments

Like many arguments you have written using in-class sources, most research papers require that you create an argument with claim, reasons, and evidence that responds to alternative views.

In research papers, you will sometimes acknowledge and respond to a conversation in which writers are already engaging directly with each other. In other cases, you will use careful analysis to reframe debates by putting writers who do not directly acknowledge each other into conversation through your paper.

Bringing Articles into Conversation

If you search and find several potentially useful articles, you should first review their abstracts. Abstracts are short summaries that appear at the start of most peer-reviewed articles. If an article's abstract makes an argument seem useful for your project, you should then read through that text's introduction. Most introductions of scholarly articles will give you background which is often a summary of the conversation the article is joining. They will then state the article's central question and claim which explains how the source is contributing to the conversation.

After the introduction, you can then skim the rest of the article, using elements such as section headings and topic sentences to develop a sense of the focus of different parts of the

argument. In addition to these parts of the article's body, you should pay close attention to the sources cited to get a sense of the conversation or conversations in which the text is participating. Following citations helps you find and understand conversations.

If you find sources that directly cite other sources you have found, consider what relation they have to each other and what roles they play in this conversation you have discovered. What disagreements do you see? What seem to be the central issues debated in the conversation? To figure out how you may join the conversation ask yourself questions such as: What gaps exist in the conversation? What issues has no one addressed? What points in each argument do I agree with and what points do I want to challenge? If you find a source that you almost entirely agree with, you need to be careful – do not write the same argument. You will need to find ways to move beyond this source's claims so the conversation does not become repetitive.

If sources you have found in a search do not directly cite each other, reflect on how are they addressing interconnected issues. As you read your potential sources more deeply, you may discover that the sources seemed to be exploring related ideas but actually do not have enough common ground for you to put them into conversation. If this is the case, you will need to look for some new sources and a different debate from the conversation you initially imagined.

If you do read sources closely and think there are enough connections, consider what gaps the sources could address in each other's arguments, what kind of synthesis you could create between them, and how you can shape or address your research question by bringing them into conversation.

Joining Conversations through Annotated Bibliographies

The best strategies for joining conversations as you research involve summarizing what you find, but also entail asking questions to advance your thinking so you can revise your evolving argument. One form these ongoing notes can take is an annotated bibliography, a task you may be assigned as part of some research projects. An annotated bibliography lists citation information for each source, provides notes that describe it, and summarizes its argument if it has one. Even if you are not assigned an annotated bibliography, it is a useful tool you should consider using for all research projects.

Annotations in a bibliography can act as short summaries that help you keep track of important information from potential sources, but you should also use annotations as brainstorming spaces to think specifically about how you will engage with each source and how sources might connect to each other as parts of your argument.

If you divide an annotated bibliography into sections, it can help you to categorize your sources based on their potential roles in your paper. For example, you can put in one section the sources that you are just using for background data and create another section for sources with

arguments you are challenging. You may also sort sources into sections based on their connections to various parts of your argument or different sub-claims. Sorting in this way can help you to make sure that you are not depending too much on just a single source in any part of your paper. Letting a single source dominate the conversation often makes it difficult to keep up the momentum of your own analysis.

Annotated bibliographies help you take an active role in the evolving intellectual conversation you are joining. As part of an annotated bibliography or separately, it is helpful to freewrite often throughout your research process in response to ideas you encounter in your sources. Asking active questions throughout the research process helps you to shape your argument as a conversation with both your sources and your potential readers. Connecting persuasively with carefully chosen intellectual conversations and anticipating the interests, perspectives, and needs of your audience are key skills for writing strong research papers.