



Advice for Crafting Thesis Topics

The following advice is for all ALM fields of study *except* (1) creative writing and literature, where you focus on a creative writing piece of your design, (2) our life sciences fields, which must rely upon existing lab research, and (3) software engineering which is programming based.

The five points below are meant to offer you advice on how to approach thesis topic design. We call this part getting into the researcher's mindset.

Researcher's Mindset

Advocacy versus Research. When choosing a thesis topic, it is natural to follow your interests. However, it is best to avoid choosing a topic where your own passions might produce insurmountable biases and assumptions. In other words, a thesis is not a piece of advocacy work where you are out to prove something that you already believe. Thesis research needs to be grounded in a true curiosity and openness to investigation that allows you to come to conclusions that you might not necessarily have imagined when you began your project. Do not disregard this advice. It is crucial to productive thesis proposal construction.

Community of Scholars. Academic research builds on the work of prior scholars; you are not forging your own individual path. Academic research is a collaborative process where you become a member of the scholarly community. You need to give credit to those who have come before you and draw upon their work to create a foundation for your thesis. You will not be a credible scholar if you cannot articulate the existing knowledge in your field. A reader cannot trust what you have to say if you do not frame your work within the broader context of the existing research community. Hence, the first step for any researcher when choosing a topic is to begin by engaging the current literature.

Why Should Your Community of Scholars Care About Your Topic? (Answering the "so what" question.)

A careful review of the existing research offers you the opportunity to familiarize yourself with what is known about your topic. It also allows you to make a case for why further study is necessary. You need to ask yourself, what is YOUR contribution to the scholarly conversation on your topic? You answer the "so what" question about your topic by pointing to a gap in the literature or identifying a path to extend issues not fully covered in the existing research. The "so what" question needs to be answered not just because the topic is important to you personally, but is important to the field at large. It's not enough to justify a research question by saying that something hasn't been studied yet; you have to give some rationale for why you think it is a valuable thing to study. (e.g. what question does it answer, what problem does it solve, what gap does it fill, why is there reason to think there's a connection/ relationship between events or variables?).

Scale Down Your Project as You Move from Topic to Question. Most graduate students start with topics that are simply too big. Thesis research is about choosing a smaller-scale topic in order to do a thorough investigation full of rich detail to answer a specific question. By reviewing journal articles on your broad interest, you'll start to see how other researchers have broken down the subject into smaller, manageable topics and questions.

For example, a student might begin with a broad interest in internet privacy, discover that researchers have written about it extensively but not yet fully addressed differences in European and American privacy laws, and then pose the following specific question: what does a comparison of recent decisions by the European Court of Justice and the U.S. Supreme Court reveal about the different ways European and American lawmakers, politicians, and business leaders define consumer privacy.

You Need to Choose an Appropriate Research Method. How will you answer your research question? What will be your investigation method? Once you choose a method, how do you defend this choice? You can't simply choose one you like. You need to choose one that fits your question. Why do you think this method is the best one to get the answers you seek? A critical reader of research will always need to know **what** you plan to do, and **why** you plan to do it that way. Reviewing the literature will help you identify different research methods used by scholars in the field and why they chose those methods. An awareness of methodology is an essential step in developing a deliberate and viable research plan. To move forward, you need to identify appropriate methods to answer your proposed research question.

Thesis Topic Decisions Always Start with a Literature Review

We recommend reviewing Gutman Library's [The Literature Review: A Research Journey](#) (HarvardKey required). Then, you simply start your own literature review by searching for published articles on your general ideas for a topic in [academic journals](#).

Lit Review Tips:

Find Not Too Much and Not Too Little Prior Research. When you are doing a review of your topic, you are looking for a balance of prior research. You need to choose a topic where there is enough prior work to support, frame, and ground your research, but not so much that there is very little left to say that is new and interesting.

Leverage the Reference Section. Once you find a particularly relevant article, be sure to "mine" the work's reference section for additional sources that are squarely related to your topic. A good place to start in finding articles is in the syllabi from classes you've already taken.

Be Current. In using any literature, pay particular attention to how recently it was published and how valid and reliable it is, and in some cases, to the scholarly reputation of the author or publisher. Ordinarily, you want to emphasize research that is either published recently or considered a seminal work in the field. You also want to stick to academic, peer-reviewed journals.

Expand Your Search. As you dig deeper into the current body of research, you will branch out to include University Press monographs, cutting edge research from scholarly conferences, or even collaborative published works. The goal is not simply to ensure that you have read all the relevant scholarly material--but rather, to inform your approach and argument contextually. Indeed, you may even want to reach beyond the confines of your narrowly construed topic to include broader reading of relevant scholarly work, to help understand the methods that scholars in the field are currently employing in topics related to yours.

Ask for Help. Reach out to the [reference librarians in Harvard's libraries](#). They can give you information about relevant databases and help you to perform literature searches. It is important for you to learn how to use HOLLIS, the University Libraries' online catalog, as well as the journal indexing and abstracting resources, the various encyclopedias, dictionaries and bibliographies in your field of interest.

Summary

At the end of this process, the goal is for you to have developed a narrow topic that truly interests you personally, but simultaneously is one where you can retain scholarly objectivity. You will understand the importance of the existing scholarly conversation, and your interpretation of the topic will reflect meaningful interaction with the body of scholarly literature. You will not simply be providing information about your topic to your readers, but instead, you will be making an original contribution to your field of study by offering a balanced, informed, and nuanced thesis. When you accomplish this goal, then you become a member of the community of scholars whose work has contextualized your own research.