

Choosing a Research Topic

Choosing a Research Topic – Structured Study Notes

1. Why the Topic Matters

Aspect	Impact on Your Project
Relevance	Aligns with current scholarly debates, funding priorities, or societal needs.
Feasibility	Determines whether you have access to data, resources, and time to complete the work.
Originality	Increases chances of publication and contributes new knowledge.
Interest & Motivation	Sustains enthusiasm over months or years of research.

2. Initial Brainstorming Strategies

Technique	How to Apply	Tips
Mind Mapping	Write a central theme (e.g., “Sustainable Urban Transport”) and branch out sub-ideas.	Use colors to differentiate disciplines.
Literature Scan	Skim recent review articles, conference proceedings, and high-impact journals.	Highlight “future work” sections – they often suggest gaps.
Problem-Driven Questions	Ask “What problem remains unsolved?” or “What policy/practice needs evidence?”	Focus on questions you can answer with available methods.
Consult Stakeholders	Talk to supervisors, industry partners, NGOs, or community groups.	Record their pain points; they can become research questions.
Personal Inventory	List your skills, methodological strengths, and past coursework.	Match topics to what you can realistically execute.

3. Evaluating Potential Topics

Use a **rubric** (score 1–5) for each candidate.

Criterion	Description	Score
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Novelty	How much new insight does it promise?
Scope	Is it too broad or too narrow for the intended length (e.g., dissertation, article)?
Data Availability	Are datasets, archives, or field sites accessible?
Methodological Fit	Can you apply appropriate methods (quantitative, qualitative, mixed)?
Ethical Feasibility	Are there no major ethical barriers?
Career Alignment	Does it support your long-term academic or professional goals?
Funding Potential	Are there grants or scholarships that target this area?
Interest Level	How excited are you about the topic?

Decision rule: Choose the topic with the highest total score, but give extra weight (e.g., +1) to *Interest Level* and *Career Alignment*.

4. Narrowing the Focus

1. **Identify a Gap** – Pinpoint a specific unanswered question within the broader area.
2. **Define the Population/Context** – E.g., “mid-size cities in the Midwest” rather than “all U.S. cities.”
3. **Select a Time Frame** – Recent trends (last 5 years) vs. historical analysis.
4. **Specify the Outcome Variable** – Clear, measurable construct (e.g., “modal shift percentage”).

Result: A concise research question or hypothesis.

Example Progression

- Broad area: *Renewable energy adoption*
 - Gap: *Limited evidence on residential solar uptake in low-income neighborhoods.*
 - Focused question: *What socioeconomic factors most strongly predict residential solar installation rates in low-income neighborhoods of California between 2018–2023?*
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5. Testing Viability – Quick “Mini-Proposal” (1–2 pages)

Section

Content

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Title (working) Clear, descriptive, and searchable.

Problem Statement 2–3 sentences on