

Craft of Research (CoR): Chapter 3 – From Topics to Questions

The 10 salient sentence strings presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

1. Without that focus, any evidence you assemble risks appearing to your readers as little more than a mound of random facts.
2. Nothing contributes to the quality of your work more than your commitment to it.
3. If a writer asks no specific *question* worth asking, he can offer no specific *answer* worth supporting. And without an answer to support, he cannot *select* from all the data he could find on a topic just those relevant to his answer.
4. Serious researchers, however, do not document information for its own sake, but to support the answer to a question that they (and they hope their readers) think is worth asking.
5. So the best way to begin working on your focused topic is not to find all the information you can on it, but to formulate questions that direct you to just that information you need to answer them.
6. Even so, once you have a question that holds you interest, you must pose a tougher one about it: *So what?* Beyond your own interest in its answer, why would others think it a question worth asking? You might not be able to answer that *So what?* question early on, but it's one you have to start thinking about, because it forces you to look beyond your own interests to consider how your work might strike others.
7. Think of it like this: What will be lost if you *don't* answer your question? How will *not* answering it keep us from understanding something else better than we do?
8. Answering *So what?* vexes all researchers, beginners and experienced alike, because when you only have a question, it's hard to predict whether others will think its answer is significant.
9. So you make no mistake *beginning* your research without a good answer to that third question – *Why does this matter?* – but you face a problem when you *finish* your research without having thought through those three steps at all.
10. Regularly test your progress by asking a roommate, relative, or friend to force you to flesh out those three steps. Even if you can't take them all confidently, you'll know where you are and where you still have to go.