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

The 10 **salient sentence strings** presented below are lifted from the chapter without modification. They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

Ten Salient Sentence Strings

1. That's how a lot of research begins— not with a big question that attracts everyone in a field, but with a mental itch about a small question that only a single researcher wants to scratch. (Quote – bottom of page 33).
2. If you can work on any topic, we offer only a cliché: start with what most interests you. Nothing contributes to the quality of your work more than your commitment to it. (Quote – bottom of page 34).
3. Start by listing as many interests as you can that you'd like to explore. Don't limit yourself to what you think might interest a teacher or make you look like a serious student. Let your ideas flow. (Quote – top of page 35).
4. When you know the general outline of your topic and how others have narrowed theirs, try to narrow yours. If you can't, browse through journals and websites until your topic becomes more clearly defined. That takes time, so start early. (Quote – middle of page 36).
5. Find what interests' other researchers. Look online for recurring issues and debates in the archives of professional discussion lists relevant to your interests. Search online and in journals like the Chronicle of Higher Education for conference announcements, conference programs, calls for papers, anything that reflects what others find interesting. (Quote – bottom of page 36).

6. The most useful way to think about a topic is as a starting place for your research. (The word “topic” comes from topos, which is Greek for “place.”) From this starting place, you can head off in a particular direction and thus narrow an overly broad topic into a productively focused one. (Quote – middle of page 37).
7. We narrowed those topics by adding words and phrases, but of a special kind: conflict, description, contribution, and developing. Those nouns are derived from verbs expressing actions or relationships: to conflict, to describe, to contribute, and to develop. Lacking such “action” words, your topic is a static thing. (Quote – bottom of page 37).
8. Such claims may at first seem thin, but you’ll make them richer as you work through your project. And that’s the point: these topics are actually paths to pursue when devising your project. (Quote – middle of page 38).
9. 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. (Quote – middle of page 39).
10. 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. Start with the standard journalistic questions: who, what, when, and where, but focus on how and why. (Quote – middle of page 39).