

Developing a Research Project: A few Steps to Start the Process

We often start a research project with big ideas, big questions, and big expectations about what is reasonable and doable. To let your imaginations run a little bit in the beginning is essential to the process of coming up with a research idea (and it can be fun!), but the challenge down the line is always to try and reign the ideas in a little to set realistic expectations about what you can cover within the scope of a single research project.

It might sound disappointing in some senses to not be able to cover everything that you wish to. Or a single and very specific question might make you skeptical about the utility of your research. However, what's important to keep in mind is that knowledge-production, research, and academia in general is a *collaborative* enterprise. Your research will function as a piece of a much larger puzzle. You're engaging in an ongoing dialogue, not inventing something from ground-zero. What's exciting is to think about how your ideas, perspectives and opinions contribute to a much larger and wider whole- that's what the process of research is *really* about: collective, creative and collaborative work!

How to get started

Getting started with a research project can feel overwhelming. How do you decide what it is you wish to focus or concentrate your studies on (especially if you're at a very early stage in your academic journey)? Take yourself through these three stages to get you started on your journey.

Stage 1: Reflections to Find a Topic/Subject Area

First, you need to get the ideas out of your head and down onto the page. It is useful first to ask yourself some key questions, reflect, and write down some initial ideas. To get the ball rolling, try answering some of the below questions to try and identify a topic/subject area:

- What am I broadly interested in?
- Was there an idea/concept/theory/problem that I read or heard about during a lecture/supervision/seminar/video that engaged my curiosity?
- Is there something that I wish was covered by my course, but isn't?
- Is there something that I have covered in my course, but only got to spend a few days on (and I wish I could have spent more time on)?
- Is there something that I think is important that few people are talking about?

It might also be useful to visit the Laidlaw website to have a look at some of the previous research proposals that others have submitted, giving you a broad idea of the kinds of topics/areas that people have worked on:

<https://laidlawscholars.network/search/content?query=proposal>

Stage 2: The Mind Map

Once you've got the broad topic or area, it's now time to begin fleshing that out a little. The key questions you need to address at this stage are:

- What drives my interest in this topic/area? (Is the interest personal, political, academic etc. or a combination of these?)

- What do I already know about this topic? (What have I read or listened to? What kind of sources are these: both academic and non-academic? Are there particular books, articles, experiments, podcasts, lectures, blogs etc. on this?)
- What do I not know about this area? (What are areas or things I need to potentially investigate a little more?)
- Is there a lack of information available about a particular part of the topic/area that you want to explore? (What we call “gaps in the literature”?)
- Why is this topic important? (Are there underlying issues which surround the topic you want to examine that mean that we need to explore it further?)

It doesn't have to be a mind-map. You can use whatever form you think is best to help you continue to flesh out your potential research project. Indeed, you might even produce a couple of mind-maps. But this stage is fundamentally about taking stock of your overall motivation, and where you are in your knowledge of the subject at hand. It's useful to write down questions on your mind map as well that spring into your head as you're trying to get the information down (these side questions you're asking might just end up being the research question in your proposal later on!)

Stage 3: Getting some feedback/advice

Once you've organized your ideas through the previous two reflection exercises, it might now be time to draw in a bit of help from someone with a bit more expertise on the subject or area. This might be a Director of Studies, a supervisor, a course organizer or even someone in the later years of your course. You might ask if you could discuss your broad ideas with them to see if they would have suggestions that might help you fill some of the gaps in your knowledge that you identified in the previous mind-mapping stage. They might even tell you that some of the gaps you identified are gaps in scholarship in general, in which case, that's gold-dust, because that means you've hit on a topic that needs further investigation! It's important at this stage to gather two bits of general information:

1. Are there areas that you could explore further that would help you write your research proposal?
2. Are there particular individuals who would make good research supervisors who you might approach?

There are some tips and tricks for finding a research supervisor in the guide for applicants found here:

<http://laidlaw.fund.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/LaidlawCambridgeGuide-1.pdf>

Case Study: Gavin's Research Project Journey

Stage 1: When doing the self-reflection activity, Gavin finds that he is really interested in gender, that this has been one of his favorite topics covered at A-level and his degree so far. But he has also found that there never seemed to be much content so far in what he's been directed to study on the links between gender and sexuality. He also spends a lot of his time watching content on Drag Queens and their performances (both through documentaries and also through television shows, YouTube videos etc.). Through this, Gavin realizes he

wants to maybe think about doing a research project on something related to Drag and gender expression.

Stage 2: Gavin uses the guiding questions to begin to mind map out some of his thinking on the topic, trying to identify what he's already examined; what kinds of things have piqued his interest in the past, and where he can see some of these discussions being relevant in the world. His ideas are still quite vague, but already he's beginning to note down some questions or ideas that he could develop into a research project. [Gavin's mind map is at the end of this document.]

Stage 3: Gavin now has at least a collection of ideas that he's put together on the topic, and it's now time for him to see if he can approach someone who might have a bit more expertise to try and help him narrow down his ideas. He might try the supervisor he had for his "gender" topic on his course; he might try his DoS; he might reach out to an academic at the University who works on these themes or ideas. At this stage, it's useful to ask whether they might have any other recommendations for reading or scholarship in the area; whether they know anyone else that might have expertise in the area and have some time for a quick chat or some email feedback.

Document courtesy of Dr. Gavin Stevenson

Gavin's Mind Map

