

ARTICULATING YOUR RESEARCH TOPIC

Articulating your research topic can seem intimidating, particularly when you are just beginning your research. How can you convincingly explain to others what you hope to accomplish if you're not yet quite sure yourself? The process below can help you become more confident articulating your project by breaking it down into three smaller steps:

Step 1: Name Your Topic

If you are beginning a project with only a topic and maybe the glimmerings of a good question or two, start by naming your project:

1. I am trying to learn about/working on/studying _____.

Fill in the blank with your topic:

1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and their influence on his reasoning.

Step 2: Add an Indirect Question

Now add an indirect question that indicates what you do not know or understand about your topic:

1. I am studying/working on _____
 2. because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/why/how _____.

1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and its influence on his reasoning...
 2. because I want to find out how his belief in destiny influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War.

Step 3: Answer *So What?* by Motivating Your Question

This step tells you whether your question might interest not just you but others. To do that, add a second indirect question that explains why you asked your first question.

1. I am studying/working on _____
 2. because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/why/how _____
 3. in order to help my reader better understand _____.

1. I am working on Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and their influence on his reasoning
 2. because I want to find out how his belief in destiny and God's will influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War,
 3. in order to help my reader understand how his religious beliefs may have influenced his military decisions.

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. And that's a good thing!

To summarize: Your aim in articulating your research topic is to explain

1. what you are writing about: "I am working on the topic of..."
2. what you don't know about it: "because I want to find out..."
3. why you want your reader to know and care about it: "in order to help my reader understand better..."

Credit: University Writing Center, 2020. Adapted from Wayne C. Booth et al., *The Craft of Research*, Fourth Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 44-46.

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