
ACADEMIC WRITING: HOW TO FIND A SPECIFIC TOPIC AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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The questions I usually receive from amateur researchers or students writing an academic paper for the first time are “how can I come up with a specific topic?” and “how will I formulate some research questions for my thesis?” Indeed, having a specific topic and relevant research questions can be a defining moment for the success of your research and publication project. This determines whether your paper finds a home in a respectable journal. Unfortunately, while trying to achieve such academic goals, complications might arise if critical steps are not taken. Some of those steps will be highly influenced by your own level of education and inspiration, but others may come from your intellectual instincts. I wrote this paper based on my own instincts in combination with my research experience while in pursuit of a Master’s degree and Ph.D. The purpose of this paper is to assist those who wish to pursue these or similar goals. The illustrations used are related to the area of education, or more precisely language teaching, but can also apply to many others in the social sciences and humanities.

How I Usually Choose “A Specific Topic.”

To go straight to the point, what I would do first while trying to find “a specific topic” is to write a research profile, which I complete step by step. Writing this profile takes six steps, which are as follows:

Step 1: Write down some **broad/general topics** or **subject areas** (e.g. “assessment of curriculum design,” “curriculum analysis,” “error correction studies,” “evaluation of learning styles,” “program evaluation,” “study of level test,” “**analysis of replacement tests**” etc.). These will represent the different avenues you might take in your research, and they might relate to an **issue, concept, methodology, research model**, etc. that can become the focus of your thesis. At this stage it is also important to consider **the researcher’s interest**. As Professor JoAnn Pavletich, who was my thesis advisor when I wrote a Master’s degree in English (specializing in American Studies) said, the researcher’s interest answers the question, “What issues seem urgent to the researcher?” She added that, “Given that we are probably talking about someone who has been in classes on the subject they are writing on, now is the time to think about the questions from those discussions and lectures that seemed important or engaging.” With significant experience advising students at the University of Houston-Downtown, Texas, U.S., Dr. Pavletich made it clear to me that, “If the writer is not engaged, the arduous work will be more difficult and the writing less persuasive.”

Step 2: What should follow the discovery of a general topic based on your personal interest is an **investigation of the availability of materials**. Use important keywords, phrases, and specific terms in your chosen area to search for academic articles, books and other secondary resources. Google Scholar, for example, is an option for articles.

Step 3: Identify a relevant, **specific field of study** related to this chosen (general) topic in which you expect the experts in the area have discussed the topic you are interested in. For example, in general terms, I might have “**Analysis of Replacement Tests**,” on the list, but “**Reliability in Replacement Test**” can be taken as a specific example that emerges from the general field of study.

Step 4: Conduct a **literature review** in the pinpointed field of study. I would do this by searching and reading the existing publications of the so-called ‘break-through’ research or conceptual papers in the best journals of the subject matter (if possible), and selectively consider some of the works cited in such publications. “The primary goal of a thorough literature review is to find sufficient **relevant theory** and research to formulate a **well-structured argument** from which your particular research questions can stem” (Luse et al., 2012:146). The review is also aimed at finding out about what has been written on the subject and identifying **the gap** (left out by researchers) to be filled in by **the originality** of my work.

Step 5: Refine and narrow your topic down for a more **specific working title**. In relation to the **issue** of **Reliability in Replacement Tests**, for example, I might come up with a specific working title such as “**A Simple Solution to the Usual Deceptive Results in Placement Tests**,” something that captures the essence of the whole work.

Step 6: Find out what **methodology** you need to use. Determine whether the project should be carried out under, for instance, qualitative or quantitative study, and decide on what **tools** should be used to conduct the study/research. If a survey, for example, is part of the research tools, that can be started after a research profile has been written and has covered the above-listed steps and points given below (see the section on “research questions”); that is, a questionnaire is designed after knowing the stakeholders of the issue(s) being investigated. At this semi-final phase, we need to know about the methods in case it should be part of the thesis topic itself; accordingly, we might have as an example “**The ...: A Case Study (of ...)**,” or “**...: The Case of ...**”

As a summary, Table 1 below shows each steps relationship:

Step	Task	Example*/Approach
One	Writing down broad or general topics/subject areas of the researcher’s interests relating to an issue, concept, methodology, research model etc.	“Analysis of replacement tests”
Two	Investigation of the availability of materials	Search for academic articles, books, etc. by using keywords, relevant phrases, specific terms
Three	Identifying a relevant, specific field of study	“Reliability in Replacement Test”
Four	Conducting a literature review of the existing materials on your topic	Read widely but selectively for relevant theories or models, well-structured arguments, finding the gap to fill with your own original work.
Five	Refining and narrowing the topic	“A Simple Solution to the Usual Deceptive Results in Placement Tests”
Six	Finding the appropriate methodology and tools to conduct the study/research as required	See whether qualitative or quantitative study is needed; see if the study requires a survey for primary data collection

*Examples are marked with inverted comma [“... ”]

How I Usually Formulate My “Research Questions”

Having found a topic to work on, there comes the need to formulate some relevant “research questions”. In so doing, my **points of focus** will be directed to several tasks, but a lot fewer than what we often find in textbooks. Those points can be seen as follows:

Point1: Explain how the topic you have found represents a problem in the context of the past, present or future professional practice in, for example, the area of placement test reliability, foreign language teaching, or education in general.

Point2: State the purpose of your proposed research in relation to understanding or solving the problem you’ve identified.

Point 3: Before moving on to the real task, assess the feasibility and value of the research by answering the following questions: is the problem clearly stated? Is the rationale for the study clearly stated? Is the significance of the problem clearly explained? Why is this research in this area at this time important? To whom is it important? Who are the stakeholders of the research or the issue(s) being investigated (if any)? What can we learn from the research?

Point 4: After **(1)** having identified or defined a **problem** worth-solving, **(2)** set a **hypothesis** that can later translate into a **solution** to the problem at hand; finally, **(3)** formulate the **question(s)** that you should ask to get to the possible answer(s) that can validate or reject the hypothesis. Within the process, **1** and **2** can help to construct a **thesis statement** after the literature review has been completed. The thesis statement, which is a corner stone of the research project, should eventually be confirmed by the result of the research.

Steps 1, 2 and 3 (in *Point 4*) are further explained in the **2 examples** shown below; a **topic sample** is given as a proposal at the end of each example.

Example # 1:

- (1) **Problem:** In a language teaching program that requires placement test, a level assessment can be deceptive. We generally have eight levels in terms of proficiency (e.g. low beginner, beginner and high-beginner; low intermediate, intermediate and high-intermediate; pre-advance, and advance) at which one can fit the student being tested. During a test, however, we might have some students with a proficiency of a higher level than they really are and eventually placed at the wrong level or classroom. For instance, a student is ranked at a Pre-Advanced Level as a result of a test; yet in the class s/he is placed in, that student performs as one of an Intermediate level. Thus, the placement test is unreliable.
- (2) **Hypothesis/Possible Solution:** Before a level test is conducted, all those who will sit for the test should not prepare for the test (too much), otherwise the result would not be reliable and the students would be misplaced.
- (3) **Questions:** How can a thorough preparation for a placement test be unreliable? What can be the consequences of such deceptive results? What should be done to prevent the flawed test results from happening?

◆ **Topic Sample.**

For the above-given questions, a research topic can be “**A Simple Solution to the Usual Deceptive Results in Placement Tests,**” or the like.

Example #2:

- (1) **Problem:** It is hard to remember Chinese characters, even though the vocabulary items we are trying to remember have often been practiced in writing.
- (2) **Hypothesis/Possible Solution:** We need a way to recall these picture-like characters in our memory by means of some real-life objects or images in order to remember how we write them. E.g. Obviously, this method does not apply to every character, but does apply to a considerable number, like seen in Patrick Lin’s *A Speedy Elementary Course: 500 Basic Chinese Characters* (1996) published by Sinolingua, Beijing.
- (3) **Questions:** What method can be helpful in learning how to write Chinese characters? Which of the learning styles we have in language acquisition can allow us to better use that method and have a certain mastery of the Chinese writing skills?

◆ **Topic Sample.**

For the above-given questions, a research topic can be “**The Importance of a Visual Learners’ Style in the Mastery of Writing Chinese Characters,**” or something else of the same focus.

Note: There are three main types of learning styles or learning modalities (Barbe et al., 1979), which are also known by the acronym VAK: visual, auditory, and Kinaesthetic. These are styles of people who can learn by (V) seeing picture, shape, sculpture and paintings; (A) through listening, rhythms, tone, chants; or by (K) gestures, body movements, object manipulation, and positioning.

To conclude, as Andy Luse and his collaborators (2012:149) remarked, “The act of selecting a research topic is overlooked in the overall process of publishing academic research.” Yet, it is the backbone of any research and writing project. As for research questions, Cayla Buttram and her colleagues (2012:1) rightly noted that, they “should not be simple questions of fact that can be answered quickly,” there are different preliminary steps to be taken and points of focus to be considered. However, the important thing to bear in mind within the process of formulating research questions is the ability to come up with an answer or answers that can solve problems and unravel some intellectual mysteries as a personal contribution to the global intellectual community. The steps I describe here are simple, and were developed from educational instinct and personal experience rather than from books of famous writers. I hope those steps can be of some assistance. For further explanation, get in touch with us at GPN, where our education consultants are at your disposal. In addition, check the references given below for additional information.

References

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Dr. Jules Harris DANARSON, from Madagascar, started his post-secondary education at the University of Antananarivo, where he received a Master of Arts degree in English with a specialization in "American Studies" in 2007. He pursued further study in Administrative Management for another Master's degree, which he completed in 2011 at the College of Public Administration (CPA) of Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST), Wuhan, P.R. China. He earned his Ph.D. in Administrative Management, specializing in Public Administration in June 2015 at the same institution.

Dr. DANARSON had been working as a freelance Administrative Consultant since the year 2012 until he became the Managing Director of "GPN Education Consulting (Wuhan) Co. Ltd.," also known as GPN (Global Polyglots Net.), in September 2015. From July 2014 to July 2015, he took the role of a Project Management Intern at Lenovo Group Inc., MBG Supply Chain Manufacturing, Wuhan Plant, P.R. China and from August 2015 to April 2016 he contributed to the same company as a consultant in Project Communication Management. A few years before joining Lenovo, he was a Business Language and Communication Trainer at HP (Hewlett-Packard) Wuhan Branch from October 2010 to September 2011, and at Dongfeng Commercial Vehicle, ShiYan from June 2012 to October 2012. Additionally, since October 2011, he has been a regular contractor at Wuhan Media and Communication College. Mr. DANARSON volunteered at HUST as an Associate Editor-in-Chief of HUST English Press, EPC (English Press Corps) from Nov. 2012 to March 2013. He was subsequently appointed Editor-In-Chief of the Press, serving from March 2013 to July 2014.

Back in Madagascar, Mr. DANARSON was a Part-time Lecturer (Feb. 2007-Sept. 2008) at the Department of Anglophone Studies, Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Antananarivo. Apart from that, he was an English Language Instructor at Business Language Training Center– BLTC (Nov. 2005-Sept. 2008) and at the American Cultural Center–ETP of Antananarivo (July 2006-Sept. 2008). Also, he was an Associate Auditor (Mar. 2006-May 2008) for Africa Now: Enterprising Solutions. Besides these responsibilities, he worked as a journalist (Nov. 2004 - Mar. 2006) at "Madagascar News" and was President of an association by the name of "Friday Talk of Journalists" (June 2005-Sept. 2008) at the American Press Center of the Embassy of the United States of America.

His research interests range from community development to project management and public policy, although his primary focus is on the management of organizational behavior and political communication. As an education consultant, he also devotes a great deal of his time to doing research on education and cross-cultural communication. Samples of Dr. DANARSON's publications in the areas of management, communications and public policy are accessible using the URL below:

- June 2015 **“Sustaining Conflict-Free Team Leadership in a Cross-Cultural Project Management Setting: Observational Evidence from China”**
European Journal of Business and Management, 7(18):155-190
URL: <http://iiste.org/Journals/index.php/EJBM/article/view/23199>
- May 2014 **“The Role of Emotional Intelligence in Curbing Workplace Violence.”** *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 4 (5): 159-171
URL: http://www.aijcrnet.com/journals/Vol_4_No_5_May_2014/16.pdf
- October 2012 **“Perceptions of Policy Outcomes as a Motivational Factor in Promoting Environmental Sanitation: Lessons Learned From The Yibin Local Government, China.”** *2012 Proceedings of International Conference on Public Administration*, 3(1): 3-20. [ICPA of 2012 was organized and sponsored by the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC), Osmania University (India) and American Society of Public Administration (ASPA)]
URL: <http://www.icpa-uestc.cn/en/home/default.php>

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