Finding your research topic: A step-by-step guide

There are many ways to approach a research project. This is merely one of them, but one that I've found works well for undergraduates.

1. Which research theme group are you in?

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| * The environment
 | * Gender and sexuality
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| * Labor
 | * Health, bodies, and disability
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| * Infrastructure, architecture, and technology
 | * Economics
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| * Religion and spirituality
 | * Government
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2. Which topics most interest you?

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| --- | --- | --- |
| * Food/Agriculture
 | * Labor
 | * Science
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| * Rural life
 | * Women
 | * Medicine/Healthcare
 |
| * Architecture
 | * Children
 | * Art/Music
 |
| * Economics/Finance/Trade
 | * Families
 | * Sports/Fitness/Recreation
 |
| * Business/Entrepreneurship
 | * Cities
 | * Travel/Exploration
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| * Education
 | * Sexuality
 | * Mexico and the U.S.
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| * Political parties/Elections
 | * Suburbs
 | * Colonies/Settlers
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| * Elected officials
 | * Environment/conservation
 | * Fashion
 |
| * Military/War
 | * Animals
 | * Technology
 |
| * Diplomacy/International Relations
 | * Gardening/Landscape design
 | * Native Americans
 |
| * Religion/Spirituality
 | * Gender identity
 | * African Americans
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| * Race/ethnicity
 | * Immigration
 | * Other:
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3. What subtopics might sit at the intersection of your research theme and your topics of interest?

4. Next, do a Google search for these subtopics, but add a term that designates an era. You might try terms like these: *colonial era, eighteenth century, American Revolution, federal period, Jacksonian era, antebellum, Civil War, 1800s, 19th century, Reconstruction*. You might need to add *America* or *United States* to narrow your search.

What ideas, if any, did your search turn up? List some possibilities:

5. Go to scholar.google.com and type in an idea you generated in response to question #4. (Tip: Scroll down and look at the related searches to see if any of them are more interesting, specific, or useful than the search terms you used.) Browse the first several pages of results.

As you read the results, some possible research topics should be emerging. (If they’re not, try another topic). Write down at least 3-4 topics here:

6. Go to library.boisestate.edu and, following Dr. Madsen’s instructions, do a search for your potential topic(s) in both the book and journal databases. If books from university presses and peer-reviewed articles are turning up, great! Note their topics, and copy/paste their titles/links into your digital scrapbook.

7. Locate primary sources. Try the Library of Congress (loc.gov), the Internet Archive (archive.org), the Digital Public Library of America (dp.la), the New York Public Library (digitalcollections.nypl.org/), and the National Archives (archives.gov). Look as well for state-specific databases, like Calisphere (Calisphere.org), or university libraries’ compilations of regional or local primary source databases, such as this library guide from Georgia State University (bit.ly/ga-primary). Check as well the collections listed on the university library’s guide to primary sources (guides.boisestate.edu/history/primarysources). If nothing turns up, do a Google search for your topic plus the phrase *primary sources*. What are you finding that might be useful? Note them in your digital scrapbook.

8. What questions do you still have? What initial research questions are emerging for you?

9. When you look at your initial research questions, are they deep questions?

Note that it’s not uncommon to reach question #6 or #7 and still not find much. That’s OK! Start again at #4 with a different subtopic. And remember that Dr. Madsen, Noah, and your research theme group are here to help, as are the reference librarians in Albertsons Library.