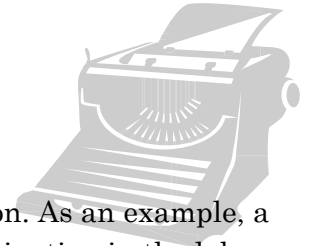


Identifying and Narrowing a Topic

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University

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IDENTIFYING and narrowing a topic are crucial to a successful research project. Let's first look at identifying a topic, which simply means identifying an area of interest, such as tax incidence, international trade, or the labor market. Here are some suggestions for finding a topic.

Select a topic that interests you. It is important to pick a topic that can sustain your interest. This sounds obvious—but how often have you been stuck with a topic that began to bore you? What economic issues grab your attention? What issues bring out the debater in you? Think about any news stories you have read in the paper or heard on the radio lately. Did any of those get you talking? Have you or your family been affected in an extraordinary way by something in the economy?

Browse encyclopedias. There are several economics encyclopedias in our library that can be good sources of topics. Some encyclopedias are *The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics*; *Survey of Social Science: Economics Series*; *The McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Economics*; and the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*. Ask the reference librarian for further suggestions.

Browse current periodicals. Skim current issues of economics journals for ideas for a topic. Here are a few titles to get you started: the *American Economic Review*; the *Economic Journal*; the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*; the *Journal of Political Economy*; the *Review of Economic Studies*; the *Review of Economics and Statistics*; the *Journal of Economic Literature*; and the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. The last two (the *JEL* and the *JEP*) often contain up-to-date surveys of topics in the economics literature. You will find all of these in the Current Periodicals Room in Perkins Library.

Once you have selected a topic, you will then need to narrow it. So how do you do that? First consider that, in economics, there are four classic dimensions along which to narrow a topic: time period, demographic group, geographical re-

gion, and event or policy action. As an example, a topic such as “Women’s participation in the labor force” can be narrowed by a policy: “The effect of the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act on women’s participation in the labor force.” The topic can be narrowed further by geographic region: “The effect of the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act on women’s participation in the labor force in North Carolina.”

Continue to read articles about your topic. The better you know the literature on your topic, the better feel you will get for the kinds of questions researchers have asked about it—and about the kinds of questions *you* should ask about it. Let their questions be your guide. Usually, the question a paper will answer is stated in the introduction.

Read as well the literature reviews in those articles, and the concluding sections. The literature reviews will either be in the introduction or in a section of their own; taken as a whole, they will outline the boundaries of the research that has already been conducted. The conclusions often identify questions that are still unanswered. If you are lucky, much of that work may have already been done for you. That is, for some topics, recent comprehensive surveys of the literature may exist. If you find such a survey, be sure to consult it.

Remember to confer with your professor about narrowing your topic. But don’t expect or ask that he or she do it for you! Rather, have two or three directions for refinement in mind that you are prepared to discuss. And be open to suggestions by your professor; do not go to the conference with a closed mind.

A topic, once narrowed, is always subject to further refinement. As you progress into your project, you should be prepared to *modify* (not change!) your topic based on the data, evidence, and research methodology available to you. A topic that seems practicable in theory may reveal itself to be impracticable in practice. ■

