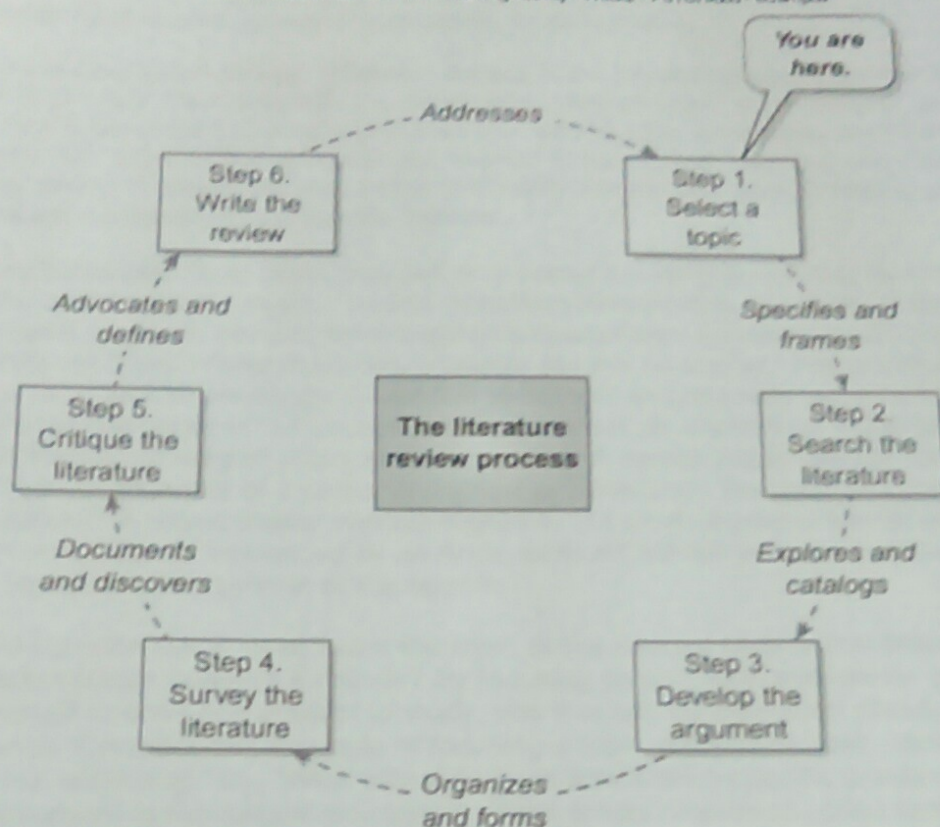




Key Vocabulary

- **Personal Interest**— The subject or question that first inspires interest. This should not be confused with a preliminary topic.
- **Research Interest**— A personal interest that has been refined by specificity, focus, and vantage point.
- **Preliminary Topic**— A research interest that has been refined enough to be a potential topic but has not yet been tested by research.

Curiosity is the heart of all research. The origin of most research interests stems from the conflicts, issues, concerns, or beliefs encountered in daily work. We question why specific facets of work succeed while others fail, why some strategies or tactics succeed more than others, or why people think, learn, and act in certain ways. Examples from the workplace that can stimulate research are: What causes the conflict among members of committee work groups? How accurate are standardized test scores in measuring individual student achievement?

Leaders trying to improve organizations seek ways to develop better programs, to improve working relationships, and to motivate people to complete specific tasks. They might ask, for example, what is the recipe for creating successful change? Is having a forceful leader a precondition for a successful group? How does the principal guide the teaching staff to improve student performance? Does success come from "telling it like it is"? Each of these questions

can initiate the need to seek answers from others, to do research.

Examine this idea called *research interest*. Notice in the preceding examples that the interest is framed in two ways. First, it names a curiosity or a concern about some subject, and second, it identifies the subject itself. Curiosity provides the "why" for the work being considered. The topic provides the "what" of the research, the subject to be studied. Defining and clarifying this "what" of the research allows the researcher to identify it in the literature. Curiosity provides the personal energy necessary to pursue the interest.

Three transformations must take place before a personal everyday interest can evolve into a researchable topic for formal study. The first transformation creates specificity of topic. When asked to select a research interest, most beginning researchers will answer with a global response, such as, "I am interested in why students are not achieving." The problem with this response lies in its lack of specificity. Given this statement as presented, could a researcher see and measure the concern? Of course not. The interest, as expressed, is too broad. A more detailed definition of the subject under study is needed. A researchable interest must be precisely stated. An example of a personal interest is, "How does the weather change from season to season?" A researchable interest might be, "To what degree is March weather in coastal northern California influenced by an Arctic airflow?" Which of these two interests would be easier to research—the general or the specific?

The second transformation must focus the topic. Is the interest chosen too broad, or does this interest contain multiple subjects for study? By focusing on precision and clarity, you focus the interest. You must choose one subject to study, one that can be examined clearly. You must set clear boundaries. Consider this example of focusing a topic. Instead of "I am interested in why students are not achieving," try, "What effect does understanding specific academic language have on achievement in the natural sciences for third-grade Hispanic second-language learners?"

The third transformation is one of perspective. The personal interest comes from an individual's need to know more about a specific subject. A researchable interest emerges from the vantage point of an academic discipline. The interest is no longer a question of "what I need to know," but transforms into a question of, "What do those in this academic field know about the subject, and what do they need to know?" The research comes from that academic field's scholarly writings and the questions posed in academic conversation and debate about that subject. Formal research must be approached using the vantage point of a specific discipline such as sociology or psychology. Selecting an academic discipline provides a direct avenue to the specific knowledge about the topic.

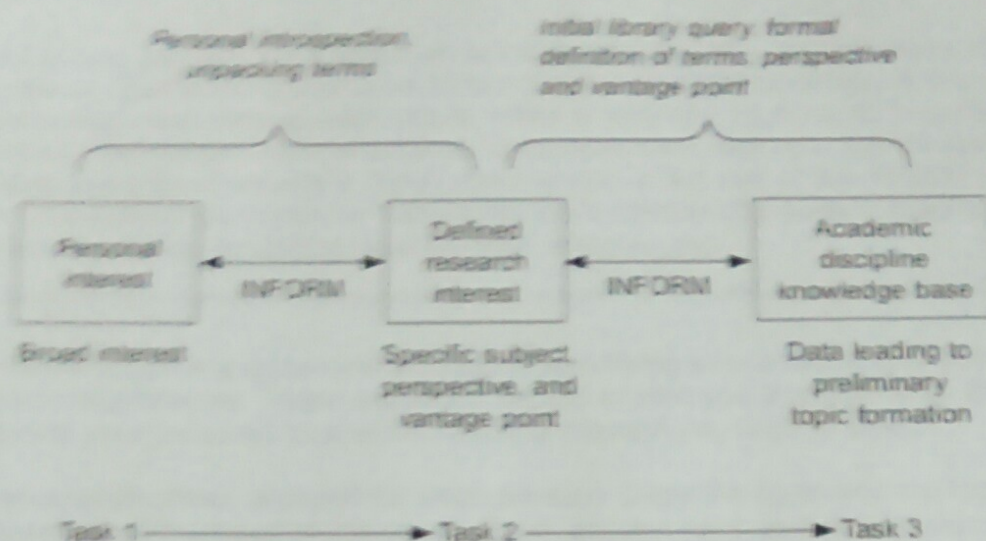
A personal concern must also be a concern for the larger academic community. A viable research interest must address the academic field's need to know and must be a question for the entire academic community to consider. Does your curiosity, your need to know about something, mean that the academic community has that same need? Framing a solid research interest is key to accessing a topic that is researchable in the literature.

A research topic is more than simply the main idea of a paper. The topic provides the entry point to the literature, decides the boundary of the literature review, identifies the subject of research, and determines the strategy necessary to answer the research question.

These transformations require three tasks: (1) choosing a personal interest, (2) refining that interest, and (3) using the research interest to identify a specific research preliminary topic.

Figure 1.1 shows these tasks.

Figure 1.1 Moving From Interest to Topic



Task 1. Choose a Research Interest

Most applied research begins by selecting an everyday problem, interest, or concern for further study. Selecting an interest for study needs great care and forethought. As the opening quote says: "Hoe in haste, harvest in tears." Selecting a suitable interest for research is critical to the success of the project. This search begins with personal reflection that uncovers an interest.

Research interests come mainly from the researcher's curiosity. Various professional and public settings provide the context for these concerns and present fruitful opportunities for the discovery of a formal research topic. If one's own introspection does not provide an issue, other avenues are available. Topic suggestions can come from experts knowledgeable in the academic disciplines or from those who are skilled practitioners in the field. Perhaps reading various academic and professional trade journals can uncover areas for further research. Frequently, journal articles include suggestions for further research. Tapping into media and professional association reports about current issues will also uncover research alternatives. Also, the current national, state, or local debates and initiatives concerning your professional field can become research interests. Finally, you can seek issues from your applied field.

Next, identify and use the scientific principles or theories of your chosen area to address the issue. For example, what theories in cognitive psychology speak to the developmental learning abilities of students? What does sociological theory predict about group behavior? How does cultural anthropological theory provide an understanding about the culture of the work community? The theoretical models in the various social sciences can always provide new insights. In fact, there are many places to find research interests. The following provides a summary of possible interest resources.

- Professional experience
- Suggestions from experts

- Academic journals
- Topical debates within your profession
- Examining academic theory in your field

Exercises

Throughout this text, you will find a series of exercises to help in the various tasks of developing a literature review. The first four exercises in this chapter employ free writes. A *free write* is spontaneous writing done without reference to notes or outlines. Its purpose is to explore what you have already internalized about a subject. These exercises will lead you through the transformations using four free writes. Each one appears at the end of this chapter's subsections. The subject statement for each exercise is followed by guiding questions. Respond to each question by writing ideas as they occur to you.

The following guiding questions will help in specifying your interest and surfacing your personal attachments. These questions should enable you to pinpoint an interest and recognize your personal connection with the interest you wish to study.

Use a separate sheet of paper for each session. Copy the topic and the questions for that exercise at the head of the paper. Then, answer each question in descending order. Read the question aloud, and then act quickly, allowing ideas and written responses to flow. As ideas come to mind, write them as simple, independent, declarative statements, one after the other, as quickly as you can. Do not be concerned with spelling, grammar, or composition.

Allow no more than about fifteen minutes for each session. If you have exhausted your responses to the questions before the end of fifteen minutes, wait for about thirty seconds, and push yourself to find three more responses. After the exercise, put the paper down without rereading it, and leave it for about a day. At the end of the twenty-four-hour period, go back to your writing for that exercise. Read, review, edit, delete, and add whatever comes to mind. Follow this pattern for the exercise in each of the next four subsections.

Exercise 1.1: Discovering the Subject of Your Interest or Issue of Inquiry

1. What is your personal interest or issue?
2. What are the component parts of this interest?
3. Why did you become curious about this question?

Researcher Bias

Researchers often have personal attachments to, and views about, their personal interests. Researchers have opinions about the problems in their field and often have preferred answers to which they are committed. These preconceptions, personal attachments, and points of view

present both strengths and weaknesses for the research effort. Personal attachment to an interest provides the passion and dedication necessary for conducting good research, which is a plus. Unfortunately, personal attachment can also carry bias and opinion, causing researchers to jump to premature conclusions. Rather than arriving at a conclusion after methodical scholarly work, they succumb to bias. While bias and opinion can never be removed completely, they must be controlled.

How does a researcher control bias and opinion? First, careful introspection can bring these personal views forward, where they can be identified as what they are. By rationally identifying and confronting these views, the researcher can control personal bias and opinion, committing to being open-minded, skeptical, and considerate of research data. If these attachments remain embedded and unidentified, the research will be severely compromised. A researcher hobbled by unchecked bias can only produce biased findings.

This exercise should have uncovered some demons. Demons are unavoidable, but must not be allowed to control or influence the research. They can, however, be a point of entry to the significance, the "why," of the research. Put them to work when you explore the significance of the research.

Exercise 1.2: Understanding the Personal Viewpoint

1. What previous knowledge do you have about your interest?
2. What personal experience do you have that influences you about this issue or interest?
3. What are your beliefs, biases, and opinions about this interest or issue?
4. What predisposes you to certain conclusions about the issue or concern of study?
5. How will you identify and isolate your personal bias, opinion, feelings, and intuition to preserve your neutral position as a researcher?

Task 2. Refine a Research Interest From a Personal Interest

Selecting a potential issue for research is just the first task in Step 1 (Select a Topic). Next is narrowing the selected interest down to a clearly identifiable, significant, and researchable interest. Often early considerations of a research interest are so broad that subject specificity, focus, and vantage point are, at best, ill defined. What do you actually want to study? Is it well defined? What focus will you use to examine it? Where, from what angle or vantage point, can you best conduct the research? There are many studies within each broad interest that can provide important contributions; the trick is to settle on one interest. Clearly define the potential research interest, its specific focus, and its vantage point.

Activity 1. Specifying a Research Interest

Is your original interest clearly defined? The key to clearly defining the topic depends on your ability to isolate the key ideas in the statement of interest. These key ideas—those words and

phases that create the meaning of the interest statement—define the subject of any research. Broad interests tend to be ambiguous and not suitable for research. A hazy interest statement may also contain many inferences that need definition. Precise definitions are necessary. The following example demonstrates the problem.

An example of a research interest used earlier in this chapter was, "To what degree do standardized test scores predict true student achievement?" This question needs to be refined before it can produce a usable topic for study. The broad scope and lack of a clear description of key ideas demand more consideration to gain the specificity needed. What are the key ideas? To identify them, look first for the subjects, verbs, and objects in the sentences. In this interest statement, the subject is "scores," the verb is "do predict," and the object is "achievement." These are the key ideas to be examined. When taking apart this first interest statement, it quickly becomes clear that this subject is too broad. What does *degree* mean? How can you measure it? What do these test scores assess? What measurement is used? How accurate are the yardsticks of measurement? What does the word *predict* mean? How can we measure it? This interest needs to be more precisely defined.

Developing exact definitions for each of the key ideas that make up the interest statement is any researcher's first task. Definitions for **key terms** must be exact in order to identify the subject of the research. Without precise definitions, you will not be able to form your topic. Once you have specified your subject, you need to decide on a focus for your research.

Activity 2. Focusing the Interest

Focusing the interest means narrowing the study to one clearly defined subject. If the subject is ambiguous, then the researcher cannot identify the actual subject of the review. Often, broad interests contain multiple subjects that could be studied. The previous example is one such case. This interest could be studied from an individual, group, or organizational perspective. For instance, the research perspective could focus on the student, specifically individual student behavior, attitude, skills, or knowledge. How can a change in student behavior affect performance on an achievement test? How do student attitudes affect performance in certain achievement assessments?

Alternatively, the research perspective could focus on group behavior. How does a certain group respond to certain testing conditions? What are the effects of this kind of test on group performance? From an organizational viewpoint, a researcher might ask, "What effect does providing pretest review time have on student achievement scores?"

After narrowing the focus of the broad interest, we see usable topics such as, "To what degree are state standardized test scores in language arts predictive of student success in college placement with regard to Subject A exams?" or "How does teacher competency in test preparation of students affect student achievement on a standardized test?"

Excercise 1.3: Selecting the Focus of Your Study

Remember to write out your answers in detail so that you end up with a useful reference page.

1. Clearly identify the focus of the study interest.
2. Are you looking at individuals, groups, or organizations?

3. Specifically name the individuals, groups, or organizations that you plan to study.

The previous exercise probably produced many choices as possible focuses for research. The next step is to narrow the interest and choose one subject for study.

Activity 3. Selecting a Perspective

Once you have selected the focus of the subject, you need to select the perspective or vantage point that is the place from which you view the subject. What is your vantage point? Vantage point depends on the choice of an academic discipline, which in turn usually depends on the subject chosen for study and the particular perspective from which the researcher has chosen to study it. What is your unit of analysis? Are you studying individuals, groups, or organizations/communities? The unit of analysis is important because the social sciences are divided this way.

To illustrate this point, the researcher might study the tribal behavior of groups and the effects this has on standardized testing and student achievement. Perhaps the researcher might address the social interactions that affect student achievement. Each of these possibilities anticipates the need for a particular field of knowledge. If the subject is from the individual student's perspective, then psychology may provide the best vantage point. If the subject focuses on a tribal perspective, then cultural anthropology will provide the best vantage point. If the subject is achievement from the perspective of group reactions and interactions, then sociology will provide the best vantage point. Clearly defined **core ideas**, and a specific focus and vantage point from which to study, transform a broad personal interest to a researchable interest.

Exercise 1.4: Choosing the Vantage Point for the Study

1. What academic fields best lend themselves to your subject and perspective for research? (If you are still considering more than one perspective, choose a suitable academic field for each perspective.)
2. What are the specific knowledge areas of this academic field that will best help in exploring and defining the research subject?
3. What knowledge competency do you have in this academic field?
4. What additional knowledge of this academic field do you need to acquire to have a solid foundation to address this interest?

As with the focus, the researcher must narrow the vantage point. You can anticipate many possibilities surfacing from the previous exercise. Select the vantage point that will present the best viewpoint for accessing data about the research interest.

Activity 4. Reflection: The Key to Interest Selection

The key to developing a successful research topic is the ability to examine the personal inter

concern, or problem to study. The more clarity and specificity brought to bear in defining the interest, the easier it is to connect this interest to a researchable topic of study.

Experience with students choosing interests tells us that beginning researchers sometimes neglect to take the time necessary for reflecting on what they will actually study. Capturing an interest of study haphazardly without considering intent, perspective, or vantage point can produce awkward and unsatisfactory results. Therefore, taking time to choose an interest for study carefully is critical for all researchers. All of us wish to find a topic quickly, but haste will produce awkward and unsatisfactory results.

Taking a personal interest and transforming it into a usable researchable interest is much like the work of setting up a photograph. Compare selecting a subject for research to photographing a scene. Imagine yourself standing at Big Rock Campground in Joshua Tree National Park. Around you are miles of desert with shifting light and shadow. Perhaps there are also people, reptiles, plants, or insects in your scene. Do you want a photo of an ancient juniper tree, or do you want a picture of a family around a campfire? What is the purpose of the photograph, and what is your goal? If your goal is to record the entire park in seasons over time, you would set yourself up for a lifetime's work. Usually, though, your intent is not to photograph the entire park or to study everything about your subject from all perspectives. Rather, it is to select one worthy subject of interest and to do it justice using your chosen perspective.

For both the photographer and the researcher, an initial interest in the subject sparks the task. In both cases, we have a specific image of the outcome that we expect to see. Also, in both cases, that early expectation will, in all likelihood, be different from what actually results. The selection of the subject of a photograph is just a starting point. A satisfactory end product will appear only after much exploration into focus, intent, and perspective, all of which will change as you delve deeper into your subject. Perhaps the final photo will be substantially different from what you originally conceived it to be. In both photography and research, it is necessary to be willing to see what actually works and to continue down productive paths, while being willing to abandon those paths that meander aimlessly without leading you to satisfactory results. The first photograph may be of a jagged rock. The photo you keep may be a close-up of the quartz fragments in one section of metamorphic stone in that jagged rock.

Like the photographer, a researcher must have a subject of interest that launches the inquiry and must also craft and mold the research. The researcher follows a path that works to define the research interest rather than simply adhering to the original intent. Evidence, whether of eye or the mind, must lead the way.

Exercise 1.5: Developing Your Interest Statement

This exercise combines and patterns the information gathered from your free write. Reflect on and analyze the written information produced by the earlier exercises, and develop a specific statement of interest. Initially, this statement could be a single question or a declarative sentence. Make it clear and concise. Develop a second statement that defines the significance of the research. Finally, write a statement that clearly defines beliefs, values, biases, and opinions, noting how you will neutralize them when following your research.

Using the information you have developed through your introspective work produced in Exercises 1.1 through 1.4, answer the following three questions.

1. What is your specific research interest?
 - a. The interest, issue, or concern of my research is (answer in seven sentences).
 - b. Cross out the two least important sentences without changing the key idea.
 - c. Cross out any words or phrases that can be removed without changing the meaning.
 - d. Reduce your remaining draft to three sentences.
 - e. Be sure your final three sentences identify the subject (What are you studying?), perspective (How are you looking at it?), and vantage point (What academic field will you use?).
2. What contributions to the field make this research important?
3. What are your beliefs, values, biases, and opinions?
 - a. How will these beliefs, values, biases, and opinions help you in conducting your research?
 - b. How will you prevent the tendencies contained in your personal viewpoint from affecting the necessary neutral stance of a researcher?

Now, using your answers for Questions 1 through 3, write a statement that clearly defines the interest for your research work, a statement that defines the significance of your research, and a statement that defines your personal tendencies and how you will control them. When completed, you will have a researchable interest.

Task 3. Use the Research Interest to Identify a Preliminary Research Topic

You are now ready to address the last concern of this chapter. How do you translate a defined personal interest of study into a suitable topic for formal research? Begin by reviewing your progress so far.

Figure 1.1, introduced earlier in the chapter, shows the three stages for refining a personal interest into a usable topic for research. Reading from left to right, notice that in Task 1 you selected an interest that you have identified as an important everyday problem needing attention. If the interest definition is vague, you must clarify it through specific definition. Next, continue to Task 2.

Introspection narrows the interest through the choice of a particular subject, perspective, and vantage point. Choosing a vantage point allows access to a defined academic field of study. Now, address the final stage for selecting the preliminary topic of study, which is the last concern of this chapter.

When addressing Task 3 of Figure 1.1, you leave personal understanding, and focus on t

shared knowledge of the academic community. To accomplish this transition, the researcher needs to translate the research interest into a preliminary topic for formal research. As stated earlier in this chapter, the research interest must align with the external concern and work of that academic community. Why is this important? Without aligning the research interest to a topic of study the academic community addresses, there is no avenue by which to gain access and entry to the relevant academic body of knowledge.

Some students believe that they have a well-defined study interest topic and proceed directly into research. These students complain that they have used the Internet and been to the library. They are working hard at gathering information about their topic, but can find nothing written on it. Rarely does a researcher stumble onto a unique and previously unidentified topic of study. Previous work has been done on almost all the interests we consider. So what is the difficulty? Usually the difficulty is a lack of appropriate academic terms. Students often try to use their everyday vocabulary to access the specific language, vocabulary, and discourse of a specialized field.

Word usage and meaning are particular to context. All academic fields have an esoteric language to describe their subjects of study. At its worst, the language deteriorates into jargon. The chances are remote that a researcher's use of everyday language conforms to the technical language an academic field uses. The following example shows the differences in the meaning of a term as used by different academic disciplines.

Consider the word *conflict*. Informally, conflict is defined as a disagreement or argument, or as an incompatibility of goals between parties. As used in the discipline of history, conflict could mean a war, as in an armed conflict. As used in organizational psychology, conflict is an organizational breakdown of the standard mechanisms of decision making. As used in social psychology, conflict is behavior that occurs when two or more parties are in disagreement. As used in personal psychology, conflict may refer to a person's internal struggle. As used in literature, conflict is whatever keeps a character from achieving a goal. As you can see, each academic discipline defines terms to meet its specific needs.

You must gain language skill in the academic field chosen and become familiar with the phrasing that identifies the potential subject of study. Once functionally skillful in the language used, you will be able to navigate for subject definition and topic identification. The researcher can then easily translate the key ideas that provide definition for the subject of study.

Three activities must be accomplished in order to complete Task 3 of Figure 1.1. They are (1) becoming familiar with the academic terminology, (2) gaining entry into the discourse about the intended subject of study, and (3) revising the initial interest statement (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 Task 3: Converting the Research Interest Into a Preliminary Topic Statement

<i>Job</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>References</i>	<i>Library Access</i>	<i>Virtual Library Access</i>
<i>Activity 1</i>	Become familiar with the academic terminology.	Thesauri Dictionaries	In reference stacks, catalogued by academic discipline.	Either: Do a keyword search. Query by keyword, by particular reference type,
<i>Activity 2</i>	Gain entry into	Encyclopedias		

the discourse
about the
intended subject
of study.

by availability
online.

Or:

Query library A
to Z on the main
page of the
library website.
Reference types
will be in
alphabetical
order.

Activity 3

Consult with
your research
librarian.

The reference section of the library provides the necessary tools to easily complete the jobs of Task 3. As you begin, refer to Figure 1.2. For Activity 1, begin by consulting the subject area thesauri and dictionaries to become familiar with the academic terminology that fits your interest statement. Each of these references has a particular purpose. The subject area thesaurus lists the various synonyms that align to the keywords of your interest statement. When using this reference, you may also find particular words that better define and narrow your topic of study. The subject dictionary provides a different reference point. Using the results of your thesaurus search, consult the dictionary to determine if the definition of the terms you selected fits your needs. It is important to note here that by querying subject area dictionaries and thesauri, you access the language used in the specific academic discipline of your topic. These references provide the language familiarity and phrasing necessary to transform the terms of the interest statement into a viable preliminary topic statement, a statement aligned to your chosen academic field. Once you have identified the correct terms that correspond to your interest, you have completed Activity 1.

You are now ready to complete Activity 2. Using your newly found terminology, consult the subject handbooks and encyclopedias to access the academic discourse about your topic. Subject handbooks discuss the theories relating to the topics of the academic field and give you a great head start in determining the boundaries for your literature search and creating an overview of the academic discourse about your subject.

Handbooks can be organized in three ways. First, handbooks can discuss theory as it evolves. This is done chronologically. A theory is first discussed, and as it changes, the commentary evolves. Second, theories can be organized topically. In this case, you would find the research topic that aligns to your needs and review the section for the appropriate discussion about that theory. Third, handbooks are organized around current discussions in the field. This type of handbook deals with the hot topics in the academic area and emerging theoretical considerations.

Encyclopedias also provide great access to the academic discourse on your subject. Because encyclopedias are organized in alphabetical order, it is a simple task to find the theory and discussion relating to your topic. Using the keywords and terms selected from Activity 1, simply page to the reference point in the encyclopedia and read on. The encyclopedic entry will begin with an overview of your subject followed by a detailed discussion of relevant theory, and finally will list the relevant contributors and authors for further study.

After consulting the appropriate encyclopedias and handbooks, you now have translated the

everyday language of your interest statement into the terminology of your academic field. You also have an overview of the topic and the relevant theory and discourse about your topic. Finally, you have built a beginning list of the theories and contributing authors to begin your literature search. Activity 2 is complete.

Just a word about where to find these important reference tools in the library: when going to your university library, find the reference section or reference stacks. They will be catalogued by academic discipline. Knowing your vantage point, seek out the appropriate discipline and find the references that address your topic.

Here are two basic options you can use when consulting the library's virtual portal. Go to the library website and do one of the following. First, do a keyword search. This query will request three pieces of information: (1) keyword; (2) the particular reference text category; and (3) library location, which, in this case, is online. For instance, if you are looking for dictionaries, you would type in *keyword, dictionaries, virtual online*. This query will display all of the reference dictionaries available online. Simply select the academic discipline dictionaries appropriate to your vantage point, and you are on your way. The second option can usually be found on the main page of the virtual library portal. It is a subject "hot button" called *Library A-Z*. When clicking this hot button, a new screen will appear providing an alphabetical listing of all the resources in the virtual library. Simply scroll down to the reference category you need, and click it. All of those references will be displayed. Say you are looking for handbooks. You would click *Library A-Z* on the main page of the library portal. An alphabetical listing of the library resources will appear. Scroll down to the H section of the listing, find Handbooks, and click that entry. All of the handbooks available will appear, and you can sort through them to determine the appropriate entries for your review.

Using the new language and definitions you found when completing Activities 1 and 2, refine your interest statement. Now it is time to seek advice. Make an appointment with your university's research librarian. Your consultation can be done at your university library or online as available. Discuss the details of the research interest; be clear about your topic, your perspective, and your vantage point (academic field). Describe your progress with your literature review, and ask for tips and advice.

Rules for Library Use

Before your first trip to the library, whether you are consulting online resources (a virtual library) or an actual library, stop for a minute, and review some important rules on library use. Heed these rules will save time and produce better results.

Rule 1. Know Your Librarian

- The research librarian, whether online or in person, is a friend, a guide, and a coach. If you are using a library for the first time, consult first with a research librarian. Make sure that you have formed a positive relationship and can rely on the librarian as coach, mentor, and confidant.

Rule 2. Be Purposeful

- Have a clear purpose and plan when researching. Wandering the stacks, exploring the subject catalog, or surfing websites is entertaining, but it is not productive.

- Every time you conduct research, know what you are looking for and where to get it.
- Have a strategy for research. Planning saves time. Know what you want to do before you take your first step. What types of information do you need, and where can it be found? Are you scanning the subject catalogs to refine your topic? Are you consulting the specific subject dictionaries to define terms?
- Have a schedule of work and specific outcomes for the outing. Set goals and stick to them. Bricks and mortar and online libraries present many temptations and distractions—a provocative title that catches the eye, a new book from a favorite author, an enticing reference link. You must be disciplined. Honor your time, schedule your breaks, and focus on the task.
- Finally, before you end a session, plan your next tasks. What work must be done next? What is the time line? What new resources do you need? Address these questions as part of a debriefing with your written notes. Remember, we have short memories. If you save writing notes for later, you invite ambiguity and misdirection.

Rule 3. Remember That Preparation Equals Efficiency

- Be prepared. Develop and organize your cataloging and documenting tools before beginning a research session.
- Use cataloging to codify the library materials you have accessed in such a way that you can easily refer back to them, and can properly identify them by the library indexing system for further reference. Cataloging tools range from simple three-by-five cards to research software tools. RefWorks is available on most university websites, or you can purchase software such as EndNote or Citation.
- Know that documentation tools are stores of notable information. They can store notes about a subject, quotes and abstracts, further references to explore, subject maps, or a list of tasks to be completed next. Documentation tools contain library data collected for study. These tools also have various levels of sophistication, the simplest being a notebook or notepad. The more complex and integrated ones are software such as EndNote, Citation, Microsoft OneNote, ISO Researchsoft Reference Manager, or RefWorks.
- Take the time before you begin researching to build an organizational system that fits your learning style and will aid you through the entire literature review. Organizing now will save much time and heartache later.

Task 4. Write the Preliminary Research Topic Statement

Now you have the necessary information to complete Task 4—writing the preliminary research topic statement. Using the new language and definitions you found when completing Activities 1 and 2, rewrite your interest statement. Review the reframed statement to determine if it adequately addresses the intent of your interest. If so, you have now constructed a preliminary topic statement for your study. If not, rework and revise the study's focus and vantage point, or search the reference works further for other terms that would better suit your interest. Use these options until you are satisfied that your preliminary topic statement aligns with your original interest statement. Once completed, Task 4 has been accomplished. You are now ready to begin your search of the literature.

The following exercise will guide you through the task of transforming the formal interest statement, written in Exercise 1.1, into a preliminary topic of research. It has the following requirements:

- Conducting a first conversation with a research librarian
- Defining the key terms of the interest statement
- Translating the key terms and core ideas of the interest statement
- Rewriting the interest statement into a preliminary topic statement

Exercise 1.6: Refining Your Research Topic Statement

1. Conduct a first conversation with a research librarian
 - a. Make an appointment with a research librarian, or connect with your school's online librarian. Explain your research project. Provide your interest statement to the librarian for review and advice. You may also want to confer with your research faculty adviser or other faculty member for coaching on the formal research interest statement.
 - b. When talking to the research librarian, review your interest statement. State the perspective and academic vantage point chosen for your interest. Seek advice on the clarity and specificity of your work. If the librarian does not understand your interest as stated, go back to Exercise 1.5 and reframe your interest based on that information.
 - c. Ask the librarian to provide a survey of the library. Get the specifics of the inner workings of the reference section, stacks and holdings, periodicals, cataloging system, search capacities, and Internet access. Pay particular attention to the library's ability to address the academic field chosen for your study and your stated research interest. If you need more resources to complete your study, consult with the librarian.
 - d. Review the key terms and core ideas contained in your interest statement. Ask the librarian to direct you to the dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, and other reference books that address these key terms and core ideas. This can be done in person or online.
2. Define the key terms of the interest statement
 - a. Using your key terms, consult your chosen subject area dictionaries, encyclopedias, and handbooks. Find the technical definitions of your key terms.
 - b. Rewrite your interest statement using the technical terms of that academic field.
 - c. Review the reframed statement. Does it still express your intended interest? If it does not, rework and revise the study's focus and vantage point, or search the reference works further for other terminology to use until you are satisfied that the reframed statement expresses your research interest.
 - d. When the reframed statement works, go to Number 3.
3. Translate the key terms and core ideas of the interest statement

- a. Taking your reframed interest statement, search the subject encyclopedias, handbooks, yearbooks, and other reference materials for topic areas that address the core ideas contained in your reframed interest. Rewrite as the topic of your study.
 - b. Document and catalog the results, noting prevalent authors and theory.
 - c. Begin to build subject and author maps for each of the core ideas in your interest statement.
 - d. Review your work. Check for accuracy and understanding.
4. Rewrite the interest statement as the preliminary topic of your study.

Tips

- Make sure your interest is specific. Reflect on the key terms that make up your interest statement. Be sure that you clearly understand what the key terms mean and how they interact.
- Focus the interest to ensure that it is clearly described and singularly defined.
- Select an academic vantage point, and translate your key terms to those used in that academic field.
- Approach research with an open mind.
- Document, document, document.

Summary

You now have the preliminary topic for study. You have successfully conducted personal introspection to uncover an interest, and you have defined that interest as a potential subject suitable for study. You are now ready to conduct a literature search. While the work seems linear, it is not. Notice that in Figure 1.1 everyday problems inform research interests. The opposite also holds true. Research interests inform everyday problems. The thinking needed to unmask the specifics of these ideas is reciprocal in nature. The deep or fundamental understanding of one refines understanding the other. So it is with research interests and the academic discipline knowledge base. The more you learn about the topic through reading, the more refined that topic becomes. Refinement is an essential part of your subject exploration and topic definition.

Checklist

Task	Completed
1. Write a clear, specific description of your personal interest.	☐
2. Define the key concepts and terms contained in your area of interest.	☐
3. Reread your interest statement to check that you are studying only one subject. Is your subject too broad or too narrow?	☐
4. Select an academic vantage point, a specific field of study that aligns with your research subject.	☐

5. Become familiar with the resources and the structure of your libraries. Engage a research librarian in an introductory session regarding your subject of study.
6. Prepare documenting tools.
7. Rewrite the interest statement as a preliminary topic statement using the correct academic terms.

☐☐☐

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