



HOW TO DEVELOP A RESEARCH THESIS

You might be surprised to learn that the actual writing of a research paper is the last and, in many ways, least important link in a very specific chain of events. If you've done a diligent job setting your paper up, the writing of it ought to be easy. If you haven't, the writing will be sheer torture. The chain is as follows:

S U B J E C T

T O P I C

QUESTION

THESIS

(WRITING)

Subject is a freebie: it's the course you're enrolled in. Your subject might be 'introductory psychology' or 'forestry' or 'literature'.

Within your subject area, you need to next choose a **topic** (a subset of subject). Sometimes, the topic will be mandated by your instructor, sometimes a range of choices will be offered, and sometimes you will be asked to generate a topic on your own. Topics might include 'mood disorders', 'the west coast rain forest', or 'trends in modern Canadian literature'. Once you and your instructor have settled on an acceptable topic, it's time to develop a workable **research question**.

Here, the question of scope comes into play. The question you choose must be neither too large nor too small for the dictates of your assigned paper. Beyond this, it must also be *researchable* (adequate information from credible sources must be accessible). The typical college research paper is between 2000 and 2500 words long. To try to cover 'what is modern Canadian literature all about?' in that space and you'll fail. Similarly, an essay answering the question, 'what were the most popular Canadian novels of 2007?' will fail as the information is too simple and too easily explained. Once you've picked a proper research question, let's say, 'what part do global issues play in the modern Canadian novel?', it's time to do some research.

Search sources and take notes. The key when doing **preliminary research** is to let the material guide you. If you think the West Coast rainforest is in imminent danger of destruction and yet your research shows the opposite to be true, don't cling to your original notion: it's called *learning* and it's a good thing! Once you've nailed down three

or four solid sources that coalesce around a compatible set of perspectives, it's time to develop a thesis.

A **thesis** is the answer to your research question. Theses are generally expressed in terms of the standard rhetorical modes: compare/contrast, argumentative, definition, cause/effect, classification, narrative, or process. When evaluating your research, consider which of these modes will best suit your material: 'Global issues play a shockingly small role in contemporary Canadian fiction when compared to American fiction' (Comparison) or 'Recent changes to provincial policy indicate that the West Coast rain forest is a stable ecosystem' (cause/effect). Now you're ready to complete your research and **begin writing**.

If it seems like you've had to go through a lot in order to just begin writing, you're wrong. Given that you have in hand a well-supported thesis that properly addresses your topic, the actual writing of the paper ought to be, relatively speaking, a piece of cake: you will merely be reporting on what you've already learned. Better this than to be in the shoes of the poor soul at the next table who has in front of them a mass of loosely-related material about trees or novels and a desperate wish for all that paper to group itself into something resembling a competent essay!

BONUS: EVALUATE YOUR OWN RESEARCH QUESTION!

Ask yourself the following eight questions, designed to evaluate the quality of your research question and the ease with which you should be able to answer it:

1. Does the question deal with a topic or issue that interests you enough to spark my own thoughts and opinions?
2. Is the question easily and fully researchable?
3. What type of information do you need to answer the research question?
e.g., The research question, 'Is British Columbia's West Coast rain forest sustainable?', will obviously require certain types of information:
 - statistics on deforestation
 - information on government forestry policies
 - information on logging practices
4. Is the scope of this information reasonable? (e.g., can I canvas all the novels published in Canada in the last five years?)
5. Given the type and scope of the information that I need and can obtain, is my question too broad, too narrow, or o.k.?
6. What sources will have the type of information that I need to answer the research question (journals, books, internet resources, government documents, people)?
7. Can I access these sources?
8. Given my answers to the above questions, do I have a good quality research question one that I actually will be able to answer by doing research?