

CHAPTER 2

FOCUSING ON THE PROBLEM

Identification of a Problem

Research cannot commence without a problem. If there is no problem to be solved, then there is no need for research. In other words, one does not feel the need of research if one is not aware of the existence of a problem. The term "problem" comes from the Greek word "probállein" which means "anything thrown forward." For instance, a question that is proposed for solution, or a matter put forward for examination or proof is considered a problem. In some cases, the situation that seems to be a problem might have already been looked into by others, and some solutions might have even been arrived at. In such an instance, depending on the results of the survey, the topic can be narrowed down to a specific point which has not been looked into.

Selection of a Topic

Graduate students either come across a problem and work on it, or they first select a topic that is of interest to them, and then try to investigate a problem that needs to be looked into within that general topic (Horowitz, 1984).

Students usually have difficulty in finding a topic for their theses or dissertations. Berelson (1960, p. 180) reports that about half of his students do not start looking for a topic until after they have passed the qualifying examination. It seems to be the best idea to search for a topic seriously as soon as the graduate study begins. If the students are able to decide on their topics, they can take their term projects accordingly throughout their graduate studies. If they start making a file of topics that are of interest to them and take notes on any idea that they come across regarding these topics during their course of study, their task of choosing a research topic for their thesis or dissertation is facilitated.

Sources of Research Topics

There are different sources to refer to in choosing a topic. Printed materials as well as what exists in the world, especially in one's immediate academic or business environment, are the best sources.

From printed matter

Recent dissertations or theses: Dissertations or theses conducted in the area of interest will give some idea about what else could be done in the field. Usually, in the conclusion parts, writers suggest some further research regarding the topic

they have dealt with. Due to constraints or other reasons, they might not have been able to cover every desired aspect of the problem in their research and suggest others to do so. The names and abstracts of these dissertations can be looked for in *Dissertation Abstracts International*, a service of University Microfilms International in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Another one would be the dissertation catalogue in the library. *American Doctoral Dissertations* would be another source to look for the names of theses which are listed by discipline. Checking the index of these publications will give the reader an idea in the field he is interested in. It is also advised to review books on related areas to enlarge one's scope of vision. Suggestions for topics can also be obtained from the following sources.

Professional journals: Some professional journals publish lists of completed dissertations. These provide ideas on what other scholars are interested in for investigation purposes. The problems they try to find solutions for can be taken into consideration from other points of view. Whether a similar problem exists in one's country or in one's environment, or in one's region, or in one's language could be easily questioned. The same technique can be applied while going through the recent articles published in these journals.

Use of computer: By the utilization of the computer, a search could be made to find the studies conducted in a particular area of interest. Now, with the access to the World Wide Web (WWW), one's horizon is almost limitless as far as sources are concerned. Following are some reference sources to look into on web pages:

Reference Collection and Libraries

<http://ipl.sils.umich.edu/ref/>

<http://www.idbsu.edu/card/refdsk.html>

<http://www.lib.uci.edu/sources/vrc.html>

<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/>

http://www.lib.ox.ac.uk/search_fags/html

Encyclopedia

<http://204.32.221.16>

Textbooks: The introduction, preface, table of contents, discussion, and conclusion sections of each chapter of the textbook could be other sources where one could look for a topic to study.

Library cards: If there is no access to computers and WWW then library cards could be of some help. When one looks for a general topic in the card catalogue, one also sees notes on each card as "see also." The specific fields under that general topic are listed on the card following the short note "see also." These titles may give the researchers some interesting ideas to look into within that area, and at the same time help them narrow their topic to more specific areas.

From the real world

Nature: There are so many unknown features in nature waiting to be searched. This is true for all fields of study.

Structure of human beings: People in medicine, for instance, are very much interested in investigating the anatomy and physiology of the human body.

Behavior of human beings: Behavior, one of the most complex systems of the human being, has been investigated by psychologists, sociologists, linguists, and many other scholars of related fields. However, there are still topics that require investigation.

Immediate academic environment: The normal classroom, doctoral defences, seminars, and conferences are ideal places where interesting research topics can be compiled. During a discussion or a lecture, the professor or the lecturer may even say aloud, "This would make an excellent thesis or a dissertation topic." Since the most current theories are discussed in these academic settings, it is highly possible to find an interesting topic to study. Topics of interest may even be ascertained if the reading assignments given by the professors are carried out perceptively and critically.

Immediate business environment: Local organizations and groups like clinics, hospitals, schools, and business and language centers sometimes have problems to be solved, but they may not have time to conduct research to arrive at a conclusion. These opportunities can be sought if one desires to conduct a more useful and essential study.

Criteria in Choosing a Topic

Since the starting point of a thesis is the most difficult part, one has to be careful in choosing the right problem. In other words, a problem for which a solution meets an immediate concern, has to be chosen. Since the beginning of the century scholars, (Almack, 1930; Albaugh, 1957; Hubbell, 1962; Markman & Waddell, 1965; Corbett 1977, Guth, 1980; Madsen, 1983; Lester, 1984; Johnston & Zukowski, 1985) have tried to make suggestions as to what a research topic should be, and they have included several of the following criteria in their discussions:

- The topic should be of great *interest* to the researcher. It must stimulate imagination, satisfy curiosity, and sustain interest. This way, he/she can demonstrate all his/her creative abilities in the research. It is almost impossible to concentrate on a topic without having developed any interest.
- The topic to be investigated could "furnish a basis for conforming some earlier study, or a basis for some future study" (Almack, 1930, p. 35). *An advancement can be achieved by questioning the validity of the present situation.* The new discovery may then provide other researchers with new opportunities to create further advancement.

- The outcome of the research is expected to provide an *original contribution* to the existing knowledge of mankind. Thus, the results of the research should fill a gap in human knowledge. This could meet a social need, as in the case of research looking for means of some protection against an issue that causes a problem.
- It could serve a *philanthropic* purpose. In that case, the researcher conducts the research hoping that the results will fulfil his/her ambition and the outcome of the research would make him an authoritative person in helping others function better in needed areas.
- *Availability of the sources* of information is another criterion. If the chosen topic has recently been discovered and introduced for discussion and study, it will be very difficult to find enough material and data to carry on adequate research to draw meaningful conclusions.
- The topic to be investigated should *not* be one that has *thoroughly* been researched. In that instance, what is accomplished would be superfluous repetition.
- The topic must be *within the range of the researcher's competence*. If the researcher does not have the skills required to carry out that specific research, it will be very difficult and time consuming.
- The topic to be investigated should *not* be *too removed from where the researcher is stationed*. For instance, finding information about one of the African languages would not be very easy for a person living in Turkey. On the other hand, a topic on the Turkish dialect dominant in the northern part of Turkey would be more suitable because, in order to collect data, travelling along the coast of the Black Sea would be much easier than going to Africa to do research unless a grant has been provided.
- The topic should enable the researcher to *demonstrate his/her own independent work*. Advice may be received from the research advisor and the members of the committee, but the final product should be developed by the researcher only.
- The topic should be limited in scope so that the outcome should be *manageable in size*. When the frame of the topic is not stated well, it affects the amount of time needed to complete the task, and also the amount of information to be included in the dissertation, increasing the number of pages to many hundreds.

Ways of Limiting the Research Topic

Once a topic to study is decided on, it needs to be narrowed down to a specific subject before gathering any detailed information. Aside from the criteria cited above, there are other factors that help the researcher narrow his/her topic down to a manageable size and length so that the research will focus on one single problem. The following are some problem finding techniques suggested by Almack (1930, p. 48):

- Analyzing what is known, including the historical record
- Looking for gaps or deficiencies in explanations
- Looking for incongruities and contradictions
- Following cues to suggestions obtained from reading, conferences and thinking

NOVEL

THE NOVELS OF DICKENS

(By person)

EARLY NOVELS OF DICKENS

(By time)

TREATMENT OF LONDON IN DICKENS' NOVEL

(By place)

A STUDY OF DAVID COPPERFIELD

(By the number of items)

The characters in David Copperfield

(Aspect of the study)

Figure 2.1 Ways of limiting the topic

A second way of limiting the topic would be to subdivide the topic under smaller headings. Let us take the topic "Novel." Using Hubbell (1962, p. 3) examples, limitations are indicated in a figurative form. In Figure 2.1, the limitation has been done by person, by time, by place, or by the number of items to be discovered. In Figure 2.2, the topic is limited by the aspect of the study.

CHARACTERS IN DAVID COPPERFIELD

THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN DAVID COPPERFIELD

SOME OF THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN DAVID COPPERFIELD

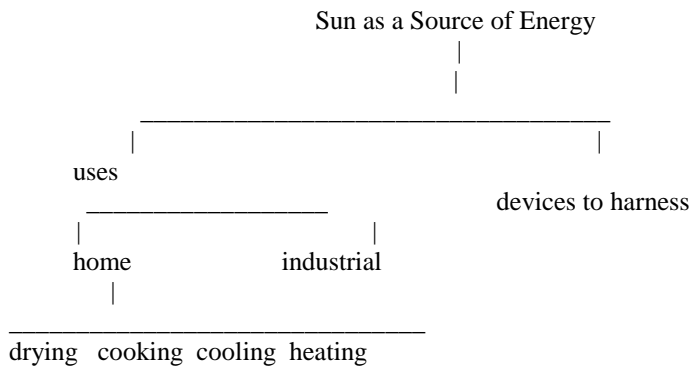
A STUDY ON MR. MICAWBER

The style in

Mr. Micawber's
letters

Figure 2.2 Limiting the topic by the aspect of the study

Roth (1982, p. 35) indicates the same type of subdivision system in a tree diagram:



A third technique would be what is called "brainstorming" or "free association." Focusing on a single topic, words or phrases that come to mind are written. For instance, on "language acquisition" one might come up with the following words or phrases:

- LANGUAGE ACQUISITION (TOPIC)
- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| children/adults | interference |
| parents/environment | bilinguals/dominant |
| | language |
| language shift | language loss |
| first/second language | Turkish/German |

After putting down the words that are thought of, certain cases can be created by linking two or more words or phrases together:

- The role of parents in child language acquisition
- Language loss in Turkish children living in Germany
- Language shift between bilingual parents and children
- Factors affecting language dominance in bilingual settings, etc.

A fourth way of narrowing down a topic would be the utilization of the journalistic technique "WH questions." Within the general topic, the focus could be shifted to the people involved (who), to the ideas and activities (what), to the places

(where), to the time (when), or to the reasons (why), or to the procedure itself (how). For instance, if we take the topic of Turkish as a foreign language, the following questions can be formulated to narrow down the topic:

Topic: Use of Turkish as a foreign language

1. Who uses Turkish as a foreign language?
2. In what activities do they use Turkish?
3. Where do they usually use Turkish?
4. When do they usually use it?
5. Why do they use it?
6. How well do they use it?

All the techniques cited above help the researcher to narrow down the topic and provide more alternatives to choose from.

A problem justifying one of the criteria stated below would be worth searching (Almack 1930, p. 40):

- An apparent *conflict* between the results of a preliminary experiment and authoritative opinion.
- A *challenge* to originality in technique, and care of accuracy in treating results.
- A probability that the results would finally produce changes in educational theory, organization and practice.
- *Uncertainty* as to what the ultimate findings would be.
- Probability of deriving a general principle concerning the influence of motive upon human behaviour.
- A topic definite enough to permit concentration of effort upon a single point.
- Curiosity among people in general concerning the results.
- Possibility of opening a new field of investigation, and discovering a number of new problems.
- Opportunity of a life work in the field.

Almack (1930, pp. 38-39) also suggests some thesis topics that have a likelihood of being accepted by the research committee:

- Accumulated facts pertinent to some prevalent issues.
(e.g. The educational system in a specific country)
- New facts on any significant subject.
(e.g. Habit factors in the sleep requirement of adults)
- New implications and new generalizations from previously discovered facts.
(e.g. The relation between income and intelligence)
- Verification studies.
(e.g. Influence of the frontier upon American history)
- Executive studies.
(e.g. The location of cotton mills)
- Scholarship or program studies.
(e.g. Financing the building of highways)
- Liaison theses.
(e.g. The World Court)

Once the problem is recognized, a number of other questions need to be raised. Lester (1984, p. 5) suggests that the researcher should ask questions about the chosen topic throughout the entire process of research because it helps to isolate an area of dispute to focus on, to eliminate the undesired details, to narrow down the topic, to speculate on the expected solutions, and to carefully plan the outline of the research.

In order to check if the required criteria are considered in arriving at a particular problem, the researcher can speculate on the following questions :

- Have I narrowed down the topic to focus on one particular problem so that I can investigate it within the time allocated?
- Do I really want to work on this problem?
- What will be my ultimate purpose for getting involved in such research?
- Who are going to be my audience? What information do they expect me to give on this topic? Will the topic appeal to them?
- What is it that I am expecting to arrive at? Will the expected results be useful? If so, for whom?
- Are there sufficient reference materials available on the topic? Will I be able to collect enough data to do my research?
- How will I collect the data I need for this research?
- What procedure do I intend to use to arrive at this solution?
- Will funding be available to carry out the study? If not, will I be able to afford the cost myself?
- Is the topic acceptable to my advisor and my thesis committee?

EXERCISES

- A. Decide on a subject that you want to write about, but first of all, do not narrow it down too much. Make a note of it on a sheet of paper, and add a few sentences explaining why you want to work on this particular subject.
- B. Evaluate the possible topics listed below, characterize each topic with one "best" alphabetized error type. Then put the corresponding letter next to the given topic.
- ___ New trends in ELT
 - ___ The music of Mozart
 - ___ How awful my English is
 - ___ Effects of war in the Gulf

- ___ Air pollution
- ___ Acquisition of Setswana, a Bantu language in Africa
- ___ Food processing
- ___ Problems in criticism of the arts.
- ___ How to teach the art of technical writing
- ___ Economic areas of the United States

Errors in selecting a topic:

- a. too broad
 - b. too specialized
 - c. too recent
 - d. too geographically removed
 - e. too personal or emotional
- C. Write down the subject area you have already decided on. Now, work out specific aspects for this area. Write the new title in its limited form. Then explain how you have narrowed your topic down.
- D. Select one of the subjects below, and narrow it down in several stages, getting more and more specific at each stage, until you have limited it enough to make it suitable for a research paper, thesis, or dissertation.

Example:

restaurants
|
fast-food restaurants
|
the increasing popularity of fast-food restaurants

General topics: Linguistics, education, literature, animals, art, health, plants, card games, music, engineering, history, sports, libraries, customs