DESIGNING A RESEARCH QUESTION

There are a few things to consider as you move from a broad topic to a focused research question. Each consideration asks you to think in a progressively narrow and concrete way:

**The Disciplines**
When you are preparing to research a topic, you may approach it from many different subject-base perspectives. Knowledge is often divided among three major classifications called Disciplines. Some topics, then, can be analyzed from many points of view, while others fall nicely into just one of the disciplines.

**Humanities**: Art, Photography, Communications/Mass Media, History, Literature/Languages, Music, Philosophy, Religion, Theater

**Social Sciences**: Anthropology, Business, Accounting, Finance, Management, Marketing, Economics, Education, Geography, Home Economics, Food and Nutrition, Law, Political Science, Psychology, Sociology, Criminology, Human Services, Child-Family Studies, Sports, Women's Studies

**Science, Mathematics and Technology**: Agriculture, Astronomy, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Engineering, Environmental Science, Ecology, Geology, Hearing and Speech, Industrial Technology, Mathematics, Medicine, Physics

Let's assume you're researching a topic about Environmental economics. From which discipline will you seek information? In reality, you might choose a topic that fits any one of the disciplines. You could explore how artistic expressions of nature impact people’s attitudes. You could examine the cost of pollution, or the psychological aspects of destructive behavior toward the environment by searching the Social Sciences. Finally, you could delve into sciences to explore the cost benefit analysis of preserving endangered ecosystems.

**The Research Question**
If you were a psychology major, you could decide to focus your research on the psychological aspects of destructive behavior toward the environment. You might wonder how people develop certain attitudes that cause destructive behavior. How will their behavioral patterns impact their surroundings? A question for a criminal justice major might be something like this:

“By helping juvenile delinquents change negative attitudes toward the environment, can counselors improve their ability to function appropriately in society (i.e., stay out of the criminal justice system)?”
The following chart shows you, step by step, how to take three different broad topics, narrow each one to a workable topic, and create appropriate research questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broad Topic</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Criminal Justice</th>
<th>Environmental Economics</th>
<th>Shakespeare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Narrowed Topic</strong></td>
<td>Women &amp; Politics</td>
<td>Death Penalty</td>
<td>Clash of recreation and nature</td>
<td>Shakespearean Tragedies</td>
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<td><strong>Focused Topic</strong></td>
<td>Successful women in politics</td>
<td>Legal defense and death row inmates</td>
<td>Ski industry vs environmental protection in Vermont</td>
<td>Star-crossed lovers in Romeo and Juliet and Othello</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Research Question</strong></td>
<td>What characteristics do women share who are successful in politics?</td>
<td>Are death row inmates receiving adequate legal defense?</td>
<td>Is the growth of the skiing industry endangering the natural habitats in Vermont?</td>
<td>How would you compare and contrast the star-crossed lovers in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet and Othello?</td>
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