



Finding a topic & asking a research question

Linking topic and research question

'What is my topic and where can I find it?' - If you are at the beginning of a scientific paper, you should first realise that you can usually only deal with a small thematic section of a much larger research area. So before you embark on excessive thought experiments, it is better to narrow down exactly what you want to deal with.

There is often a multitude of seemingly great topics that you would like to work on, so it may be difficult to choose. Consider this an advantage and boldly dive into a (perhaps only halfway familiar) topic. If, on the other hand, you have difficulty finding a topic at all, a seminar or lecture, or in case of doubt, lecturers with an open ear or fellow students can provide the right advice. The most important thing is that there is no one “right” topic, but at best many interesting topics from which you only have to choose the most interesting one.

'What do I actually want to know?' - A clearly formulated research question can help at this point because it allows you to focus on specific aspects of a topic. The topic and research question are closely linked and should be scrutinised again and again during the writing process. However, once you have a rough idea of what you want to know, the next step is to consider how you will arrive at this knowledge.

Ask specific questions: The catalogue of questions

You can use various writing techniques to develop several research questions at once. One good option is the associatively created “catalogue of questions”, which is closely based on → freewriting:

1. first write down a series of simple questions, e.g. what you expect from the topic/work. You should let your thoughts run free without paying attention to precise formulations or content criteria. This associative series can be continued until a predetermined time limit is reached.
2. then you should read through all the questions again and cross out those that have little or nothing to do with the topic of the paper.
3. write down the most important points and use them to create a second catalogue of questions. This time you should really “work your way through” the topic and ask specific questions (so-called “focussed free writing”). Feel free to make assumptions and develop your thoughts further, even if they are not questions...





4. In the final step, you can try to integrate the most important points into an existing text. Address specific questions to your work and consider whether your text has already answered these questions sufficiently.

You can use the “question catalogue method” to reflect on your writing process at any time, e.g. to review the current research question or simply to gather new ideas.

The structure arises when writing

With the help of a formulated research question, you now develop a thesis that can be tested using scientific criteria. The most important thing here is that the thesis and research question are interdependent and should be critically reviewed again and again during the writing process. In this way, the structure of a thesis gradually emerges and takes shape as you “work through” the topic.

Is this already scientific and where is the gain in knowledge?

If you see this as a kind of reflective practice, you can “practise” academic writing and thus think your way into a topic in a free and informal way. In this way, you can first gather your thoughts without the annoying pressure and fear of “unscientific” questions. In addition, you should not forget that at the end of all your endeavours you will almost always gain some kind of insight for yourself, which you can chalk up to writing experience.

