Developing Your Research Topic into a Thesis & Search

When you first start thinking about research, you probably start at a very broad point: maybe you think WW2 is interesting or something about the Gilded Age caught your attention. (Look, you have to do this anyway, so you might as well find something that interests you.) However, those topics are massive—hundreds of books have been written about any given period of history (and in the case of WW2, there are entire books covering a single day of the war)! And you only have 3-5 pages.

Here’s where you start narrowing your topic down to something very specific that you can tackle. Your instructor has provided you with a list of suggested topics, but you will still have to develop a thesis of your own for whatever you select.

E.g. Though Lincoln and Johnson planned for a Reconstruction of the American South through a, b, and c means, the actual Reconstruction deviated from their plans in x, y, z ways, resulting in some long-term effect.

So, for example, let’s consider the Cold War:
I made a mind-map (using text2mindmap.com) to plot out the main things that come to mind when I think of the Cold War. This is the **broader level possible for this topic**: we’re looking at all (well, many—okay, some) different aspects, none of them very deeply.

Personally, I don’t care much about the capitalism vs communism roots of the struggle, but the Space Race, the nuclear threat, and the use of spies are all pretty interesting to me, so I’m a little closer to picking a topic:

But 3 possible topics is 3 too many. This is the point where you might start doing a little closer reading of each, seeing which one triggers an idea for a discussion topic.

- **Pro-tip!** This is pretty much the **only** phase of your research in which you should use Wikipedia: background info and big-picture overview while you feel out the edges of a topic.

  Why not Wikipedia as a source in your works cited?
  - **Authority (or lack thereof):** no formal oversight for edits, which can be made by anyone. If the info is truly good, there should be a reference for it: find and use that source instead.
  - **Shallowness of knowledge:** as long as Wikipedia articles can be, it’s still just an encyclopedia, and therefore not an in-depth study of a topic. At the college level, you should be writing at a depth beyond what an encyclopedia can address.
So, what kind of questions could we try to answer about space, spies, and nukes?

- Why was the launch of Sputnik so meaningful to Americans?
- Would the Space Race (or efforts to reach space) have occurred without the Cold War?
- Why were Americans so afraid of Communist infiltration?
- Were the McCarthy trials (and the witch hunt for spies) justified?
- Why were fallout shelters popular during the beginning of the Cold War but not later on?
- What impact did the Cold War have on American culture and society?
- How did Russia obtaining ‘the bomb’ change the US’s Cold War strategy?

Let’s start with:

**Were the McCarthy hearings (or the witch hunt for spies) justified?**

*Why this topic?* Because I think it’s a potentially controversial topic so there’s probably been a lot written about it, plus it speaks to the interesting dynamic of safety vs freedom that’s still relevant today.

*Why NOT this topic?* It could maybe be difficult to find objective knowledge addressing the efficacy of the spy-hunting methods employed at the time. Maybe I decide to argue a position that isn’t supported by most of the sources I find (could happen!). Referring solely to the McCarthy hearings is very narrow topic—maybe I’ll start researching and find I want to broaden the scope to generic spy-paranoia → Was the level of paranoia in the US appropriate for the threat represented? Was the fear of Communist spies more harmful than beneficial?

So, we have our question. Now what?

Pick out the key ideas and words from your topic:

Was the fear of [Communist spies](#) more [harmful](#) than [beneficial](#)?

Next, we brainstorm some more. This part of the research process is kind of a chicken-and-egg situation. We want to know what we’re arguing to be able to craft our thesis statement and to help guide our research...but we might still need to do research in order to craft a workable thesis. Sometimes you have to switch gears if you find that you just can’t find anything to cite!

You’ve got a lot of wiggle-room for what you can successfully argue, but some ideas are just untenable (if you’re using real, appropriate sources, anyway).

EPatton, 6/2014
To figure out how to search for sources for your topic in the databases, come up with a few related ideas and synonyms that you can try. You can go back to a mindmapping layout or just make lists:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communist Spies</th>
<th>Harmful/Beneficial</th>
<th>Related:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cold War</td>
<td>Freedom of speech, expression</td>
<td>Sen. McCarthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Threat, Red Scare</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>McCarthy-Army Hearings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence, counter-</td>
<td>Quality of life (feeling afraid vs feeling secure)—quite abstract though!</td>
<td>Hollywood blacklist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intelligence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian spies</td>
<td>Censorship</td>
<td>Anticommunism</td>
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<td>Julius &amp; Ethel Rosenberg</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>infiltration</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research is an iterative process: you'll have to repeat your steps over and over again before it's all over.

You search.
You re-search.
You re-re-search.
You research.

Pro-tip! Do (do do do do!) use the Advanced Search features wherever you are.

The power of the Advanced Search is let you combine your search terms to minimize how many results you have to wade through (AND), include alternate phrasing to broaden your number of results (OR), or to exclude terms you don’t want (NOT). Scroll down to the next page to see the difference explained by a honey badger.
So you search like...

...and get only a few results. A few more than that is good, but you don’t want hundreds or thousands!

Pro-tip! Also look for “Full text” and “Scholarly/peer-reviewed” options to check off for your search. The first means you’ll actually be able to read your results; the other means they’ll be amazingly reputable!