How to choose your research topic

Ari Traucki, University of Adelaide

Ok so we’re just going to go a bit over about how to choose your research topic. I want to talk to you a bit about what sort of things a university might do in terms of research just to get your brains going about the types of topics you could end up doing.

So a show of hands, who thinks we can train ourselves to control our dreams? Yes or no? Is that something university students would study? Yes? And no? Wow there’s a lot of no opinions. Come on guys, wake up, it’s early.

Ok next up – shrinking dinosaurs evolved into flying birds. Do you think that’s a university research topic? Yes? And no? Do you think that university students study “does your dog love you?” Yes? And no? As a cat lover, I would not like them to study that but you know.

And then the last one, we’ll skip ahead, so chip packets help make safer water in PNG. Do you guys think that’s something we study? Ok so the answer is absolutely. All of these different things are topics. If you don’t believe the chip packets thing, we actually have that with us at our booth. So we use chip packets to line a water purifier, come over and have a look, more than happy to have a chat to you about it. It’s just to give you an idea, research can be about pretty much anything, which isn’t going to help you narrow it down. But the next bit will help narrow it down hopefully.

This one here is an example of a topic that was done by a student at Immanuel College so does the heart have its own brain? So basically what it’s saying is that the heart can potentially function independently from the human brain. So that’s a research topic that was done and it was done really really well and quite successfully.

As another example, you could look at researching if you guys were aware smartphones use rare earth metals and that’s part of the reason why they’re so expensive. Is this possible to keep going in the future or are we going to burn out and run out of smartphones and have to go back to the old Nokia 3310s? It’s probably a bit beyond your time those things could survive anything like hacky sack if you wanted to. It’s true. True story, used to do it. I’ve got the bruises on my foot to prove it.

And next up we have things like “how can we manage stress using different types of exercise?” That’s something that might be good for you guys coming up to exams. So essentially what we’re trying to do is we’re trying to get you in the middle where that little star is, so basically what we’re trying to do is we’re trying to find a topic that you’re actually interested in. So that’s probably one of the most important starting points. There’s no point in researching something if you’re not interested in it, purely because you’re not going to put the effort in. you also need a topic that you can find support sources for. So this is something where you can get research from credible sources that are actually reliable. I hate to break to it you, I’m sure you’ve heard it a thousand times already, but Wikipedia does most differently not count as a credible source. You can use it as the starting point to give you an overview, but if you reference it, it’s not going to go well for you, at all!

The other thing is achievability, so this is one of the harder ones to gauge at the start and this is where your teachers are really going to help you out. You wanna pick something that you can actually get done within the timeframe. There’s nothing worse than picking a really good project and having absolutely no time to get it all done. So we’ve got a few trap areas in the diagram here. So if you see between motivation and support and sources, so that’s one where you’re interested in it and you can plenty of information on it but it’s completely not achievable. This is what we call the over-achiever area, so you’re really interested, you’ve got plenty of information but there’s just no physical way can you reduce it down in time.

The next zone if you look in between support and achievability; this is the ‘I left it to the last minute and my teacher chose the topic for me’ zone. Ok so this is where you’ve gone and you’ve gotten given, gotten a topic assigned to you but you haven’t actually got any interest in it, and this is the worse one to be in. Because, so if you’re not interested, it’s just not going to happen until the night before.

And then we’ve got the motivation, achievability trap zone so this is where you really interested in it, it’s very achievable but there’s just no reliable information so if you’re wanting to do a bit of research on Kim Kardashian and all of your research, your resources are all basically gossip magazines, nothing’s really reliable or reputable, so that’s the ‘I may as well have just made it up off the top of my head’ section because you’ve got no reliable information to back up your claims; no one is going to believe it, it’s not going to be useful or valuable.

So we have a whole variety of resources available that can help you. So once you’ve identified your general topic of interest, this can be pretty much anything guys. You then can go and look further and see what type of research materials you can get. So you can go to all sorts of libraries, our library is accessible to students as well, you can go to the State Library, the school library, find some information, I know the L word is very scary and you can’t click to the next page of books but it’s definitely something you should definitely look into. Books are much more reputable sources because they have to go through an editing process in the first place. We have all sorts of journal articles, research publications, you can call, you can actually call up our staff and book a time to interview them. So if you’re doing anything in science or health, there’s really good chance you could get an interview from a primary source. So basically what we want you to do is use this to help you figure out what your question is going to be.

There’s all sorts of things you can do as long as there’s something that’s interesting to you, and it’s part of your life and you know you can find information about it. You could look at things like travel, immigration law, you can do languages, cultures, if you’re really interested in going around the world, why not use your Research Project to do it now so that when you’re finished high school and you’ve got a nice little bit of money coming in from your part time job you know exactly where you want to go. It’s definitely a viable option available to you. You could also look at doing something in the sports field; you could do extreme sports; you could also look at modes of transportation; green travel and energy efficiency. All of these things are completely viable options. You could look at food, yes that is a giant stack of bacon. Ok so you can look at healthy eating styles, you can look at things like epic meal time and if that those guys are actually going to have short lives considering the amount of fat that they ingest on a daily basis. You can look at diet plans, you can look at exercise, you can look at contemporary statistics on obesity. So you can look at animal rights, you can look at animal welfare, you can look at, you can go out to animal shelters and interview the staff there and work out if the rate of rescue animals is increasing dramatically or if things are steading off, if they’ve got enough resources or funding. You’ve got so many options available to you. And I feel like I’m just making things bigger for you. So hands up straight away if you’ve got a rally good idea of what you want to do?

That’s more than I expected and I can only see about five. Ok look guys, the best thing I can suggest for you to do is find something in your life that you’re really interested in, then try and narrow it down to a more broad question, so you don’t have to get the question you’re going to research right from the start. Find something that will narrow it down a little bit for you and then you look into that question. Pick it apart, identify the most interesting factor, look at if you can find resources on it, if you can, get on it!