Refining your Research Topic video, edited transcript

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NARRATOR:

This lecture is going to be about taking some of the ideas that you’ve studied so far and that you’ve learned in the process of research, and refining the topic that you’re working on, and defining better for yourself the exact problem that you’re looking to investigate.

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So, we’re going back to the drawing board in a certain sense. What I’d like you to do is spend some time reviewing your general topic and take a few minutes—10 to 15 minutes—to write down the answers to some basic questions. Ask yourself those journalistic questions: who, what, when, and where. But most importantly, how and why. How does this thing occur, this situation? Why is it important? Why is it happening? And then, of course, the more factual questions about where, when is it, who’s involved, what the actual situation is, etc., etc. But really focus on those how and why questions because those are the questions that you’re going to be answering in your research project.

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So I’d like you to take some time after watching this lecture to answer these questions—take 15, 20 minutes to write down these questions and answer them for yourself. Ask about the history of your topic: how does it fit into a larger historical narrative? What came before this situation, or event, or thing, or purpose? How did this thing start? What came after it if it’s something that happened in the past, or what will or might come after it if it’s something going on right now? What is its internal history if it’s something that has an internal history that’s changed over time? Think about that.

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Ask about the structure of the topic that you’re exploring. How does it fit into a larger system? How does it relate to or what does it tell us about social values, cultural values and norms? What role does it play in larger issues, global issues, or other topics? So that’s its structure within a larger system. Looking at it internally, how do the different parts of this situation or topic fit together? What are the different components of this topic? That can be different people, different ideas, different places. How do they work together? How do they relate or interact with each other? So, what’s inside this topic? What are the things that go into making up this topic, and how does this topic fit into a larger system or situation?

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You want to ask about categorization: what are the different kinds of things or groups within the topic? The different elements that are involved in this topic and how might they be divided or categorized? If you compare this topic or phenomenon to something similar, to similar issues, how does it compare or contrast? Again, are there similar groupings, categories within the topic as things that are similar to it?

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Ask “what if” questions and other speculative questions. How would things be different if this situation, topic, phenomenon didn’t exist, if it disappeared, or if it were put in a new context or a new situation? Ask yourself what possibly might occur. How would that change the world? How would that change this situation? What might happen in the future regarding this topic? How might it change? What might come after? Again, what things could change the topic? How might this situation, phenomenon, or event be altered? So these are all speculative questions.

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Now that you’re getting into your research, you can also start asking questions that are suggested by the sources that you’ve found. If something that you’ve read makes a persuasive claim, start asking questions that might extend its reach. Could this claim be valid in a different situation? If this person’s argument is persuasive for this situation, would it apply to something similar? Ask questions that might support the claim with new evidence. What other evidence could I find that might support this author’s argument? Does the evidence that I’ve found from my research topic fit in with their claim? And ask analogous questions that are asked about similar topics. So, if this analysis, if someone is investigating, for example, one historical phenomenon, would that analysis apply to a similar but different historical phenomenon? What could it help us to understand? So these are questions that you can ask based on the sources. And, as with all the questions on the last few pages, these are a little abstract. But they’ll be made more specific depending on the particularities of your topic.

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Once you’ve generated all these questions—and again, as I’ve said, the ones in the last few slides are all very abstract, I know, but if you think about what your particular subject is and what you’ve found, you’ll be able to make more specific questions—but you want to evaluate them and look for the stronger or weaker questions. Weaker questions are the ones that are questions of settled fact, right? So you want to look for questions that ask how and why over questions that ask who, what, when, and where. Those are going to be the more factual questions, but how and why—those are the questions that you can really investigate.

Weaker questions are also speculative questions that cannot be answered. Is there any possible data that could answer that question? Is there any way of really knowing? If the answer is no, then that’s a weak question. And then finally, dead-end answers that lead us nowhere. Maybe it’s a question that you could find the answer to, but does it tell us anything? For example, would it help us to know how many cats there were in the Alamo before the final battle there? Maybe we could find that out, but why would we care? It wouldn’t tell us anything.

And so then you also want to start combining the simple questions into larger and more complex questions. Seeing how a simple question about one aspect of the subject might join together with another question about another aspect of the subject to give you some complex insight into the way different elements possibly relate and work together.

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The most important question you want to ask yourself at this point is, “So what?” What’s going to be lost if you don’t answer this question? If we don’t know the answer to your question, what are the consequences? What are the costs? This is the most important question because it’s really the question that gives you the reason for writing this paper. If there’s no “so what,” if there’s no cost, if there’s no consequence, then there’s no point in asking the question. But if there’s something that, if answering this question helps in some way, then it’s a good research question.

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So one of the things that you’ll do for your assignment this week is to restate your research project. So what you want to do—there’s three basic steps to this: The first is naming your topic. Second is adding an indirect question. And the third step is answering the “so what” and motivating the question. Let’s look at some examples.

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So, naming the topic: start with a very basic statement like, “I am trying to learn about,” or “I am working on,” or “I am studying: blank”. So, “I’m studying the effects of fracking on the water supply,” or “I’m learning about the economics of the minimum wage,” or “I’m working on the debate over illegal immigration.” These are all fairly general, slightly a little bit more specific than just saying, “I’m looking at the economy,” or “I’m working on immigration,” but specifically the debate over illegal immigration, specifically minimum wage, fracking, and the water supply—not all environmental aspects of fracking. So, there is some specificity here, but it’s just the general topic that we’re studying.

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The indirect question, step 2: “I’m studying blank because I want to find out who, what, when, where, whether, why, how… blank”. “Because I want to find out whether fracking is environmentally harmful,” or “because I want to find out how we can combat poverty,” or “because I want to find out why so many people support a border wall.” So we can phrase all of these as questions: “Why do people support a border wall to keep out illegal immigrants?” or “Is fracking environmentally harmful for the water supply?” or “Will the minimum wage help us combat poverty?” Any of these can be phrased as questions related to the topic.

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The final step, step 3, is answering that “so what” and showing what the motivation is for your question. So, “I’m studying blank because I want to know blank in order to help my reader understand how, why, whether… blank”. “In order to help my reader understand whether or not they should support fracking”, “in order to help my reader understand the situation of the working poor”, “in order to help my reader understand how race influences political decisions”. These are the “whys.” This is the “so what.” This is why answering that question from step 2 is important.

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So, to review the process of refining your research topic: review the key information regarding your topic—what you know about it, who, what, where, when, why, and how—and then review the key questions that you’ve generated about history, structure, topic, sources, etc. Consider the “so what” of the topic. Why are you asking this question? What’s the cost of not knowing the answer to this question? What’s the benefit of answering this question and studying this topic? And then you want to clearly state your topic and purpose: “I am studying blank because I want to learn blank in order to blank.” Go through this process, and you’ll refine your project. This will give you, again, a more solid understanding of what exactly it is that you’re trying to investigate.