

FOR ALL STUDENTS: READ IN MONTHS 1-2

## 4 REFINING YOUR TOPIC, WRITING A PROPOSAL, AND BEGINNING RESEARCH

By now, you are reading about your topic, taking notes, and preparing to meet with your adviser again. You should get together fairly soon, probably within a couple of weeks of your first meeting. But don't come back until you've had a chance to do some reading and think about it. That will ensure a more substantive, fruitful meeting. It will also show your adviser that you follow through when either of you suggest some work—a very good message to send. Demonstrating you are serious about your thesis project will kick off your working relationship the right way.

This follow-up meeting has three main purposes, beyond learning something more about your topic (which you hope to do at every meeting). First, you should talk with your adviser about what you hope to accomplish in the project, personally and intellectually. If some aspects of the project are particularly interesting to you, be sure to mention that.

If your thesis bears on your goals beyond college, mention that, too. For example, you might talk about how this project fits into your plans for business, law, or teaching. If you are considering graduate studies in your major, be sure to discuss that with your adviser at the outset. Graduate programs in the arts and sciences train students to do research, so their admissions process closely examines each applicant's ability to handle major projects and reach thoughtful conclusions. Your adviser can make an important contribution to your success here.

Different students have different goals for their thesis projects. Now is a good time to think about yours. What do you really want to accomplish? Answer that as honestly as you can. Is your goal simply to meet your department's requirements? If so, you might choose to write a shorter thesis outside the honors program, if your department offers that option. At the other end of the spectrum, you may wish to gain a real sense of mastery and confidence in a subject you relish. An honors thesis is an excellent opportunity to do that. It's also an opportunity to see if you want to go further,

perhaps entering an MA or a PhD program. Likewise, it can be a useful step toward a career in law, business, or teaching and an important credit on any résumé.

Second, you should use this meeting to set up a comfortable, efficient program for working with your adviser over the next several months. Ask how often you should meet, when the best times are, and how you should schedule these meetings. Ask about the best way to contact your adviser if you need to change a meeting or ask her a quick question. Finally, ask how she wants to receive your written materials, which you will be dropping off every week or two. Does she want you to hand in a hard copy (where? when?) or send an e-mail attachment? Does she want it double-spaced? Your adviser has done all this before and will have some preferences. She'll appreciate your asking about them.

**Tip:** Set standard working arrangements with your adviser early. Find out how often you should meet, what are the best times, and how you should prepare written materials.

Let me add one suggestion myself—one that both you and your adviser will appreciate. Each time you visit, bring *two* stapled copies of any written work you plan to discuss. If you both have copies of the material, it is easy to refer to specific items and discuss them in detail, even though you are sitting across the desk from each other.

**Tip:** Bring two stapled copies of papers to meetings—one for you, one for your adviser.

Put some essential information on each copy:

- Your name
- E-mail address
- Today's date
- Page numbers
- A simple title, even if it's tentative

Because your paper has today's date, your adviser won't confuse it with next week's updated version. Because it has your e-mail address, your

adviser can easily pass along more comments after any meeting. Because it has page numbers, your adviser can say, “I notice you say something very interesting on page 3.”

Because each paper has a title, you and your adviser can easily refer to specific documents, perhaps comparing today’s paper with one you completed a couple of weeks ago. It will also give you a chance to try out different titles. For example, if you plan to study the quality of urban schools and your first paper is a list of readings, you might call it “Student Performance in Inner-City Schools: A Working Bibliography.”

I know these seem like niggling points—actually, they *are* niggling points—but they have an important purpose: to aid communication between you and your adviser. That’s a major step toward a successful thesis project and a valuable learning experience.

**Tip:** Each paper should include your name, e-mail address, and date. Pages should be numbered. Give each document a title, however tentative.

For heaven’s sake, proofread everything you turn in. Nothing says “I really can’t be bothered about this project” like a few dreadful typos. Everybody goofs up; the point is to catch these errors before you inflict them on your adviser. Obviously, you will run spell-check. Do that *each time* you turn in a draft, even if the draft is brief and informal. Informal ≠ sloppy. I’ve gotten into the habit of hitting spell-check before I print, even if I’m the only one who will read it. By now, I hit that function key by rote. Why bother? Because it’s easy and I don’t want to be distracted by typos as I review the document for language and content. Or maybe it’s just that I’m a teacher and grade myself.

**Tip:** Proofread everything you hand in to your adviser.

Go beyond spell-check. Reread the document carefully, looking for errors the computer missed. Grammar software is still not very good; it won’t stop you from using “there” when you meant to say “their.” And spell-check won’t catch the mistakes if you leave out words or punctuation marks after cutting and pasting. I’ve learned all this the hard way. I make these mistakes every day and have to catch them myself.

Since you should be editing and changing the text constantly—I’ll discuss that later—you need to proofread it each time you hand it in. It only takes a few minutes, and it shows real courtesy to your reader. If you want your adviser to read your work with care and attention, then you must do the same. It builds a relationship of mutual respect.

#### BUILDING YOUR READING LIST

As you do background reading, you should also be building a reading list. My advice is to show your adviser the list periodically. She ought to know which articles, books, and Web sites you’re using, which ones you find most valuable, and which ones you expect to read in the near future. If you are currently focusing on a particular author or facet of your topic, mention that. If you are reading Tolstoy or Proust in translation, explain which edition you are using. Open up all these issues for discussion.

Why should you talk about the readings? For several reasons. First, your adviser probably has some well-informed views about your sources. She might think these readings are the best place to start or, alternatively, that they are better approached after you’ve done some other reading. She might think your sources are excellent, or she might consider them a bit dated or one-sided. All that is helpful to know before you spend too much time on them. As your adviser looks over the list, she’ll probably remember a few more readings you should check out and perhaps a related issue you should think about. If you are having trouble finding useful readings, be sure to mention it. Your adviser might know a resource.

Besides getting new leads, you’ll probably end up discussing some of the individual readings. That’s often the best way to move into a topic and thrash out your own ideas. In effect, you and your adviser are beginning a tutorial on your thesis topic.

**Tip:** Discuss your reading list with your adviser. You can talk about how different authors approach your topic and get valuable suggestions for other readings.

In some fields, particularly history, your reading and discussion will cover not only books and articles but also primary documents. Letters, pamphlets, treatises, old newspapers, and county records are the stuff of

historical research. You should begin to explore these primary materials as you delve deeper into the topic.

Working with these source materials not only enriches your work; it shows you how research is conducted in many fields. "Often a student will develop an interest in a particular subject after reading a major book or article," one thesis adviser remarked. "However, the 'real' topic emerges only after the student consults the primary source or chases down a footnote. Especially when a student is in the early stages of research, this process of going back and forth between secondary and primary texts can yield unexpected views on well-worn subjects or turn up smaller topics that the professional scholar passed over."

That's excellent advice, and it applies not only to history but to many other disciplines as well. In economics, political science, or sociology, the primary sources are raw data about government expenses, voting records, or migration patterns. Many fields rely on public opinion surveys and census data. There is a unique excitement in beginning to work with source materials like these. They offer a chance to find something new, something no one has ever seen before.

**Tip:** In many fields, students want to explore primary source materials, ranging from private diaries to elaborate databases. Ask your adviser whether you should use such source materials, which ones are most appropriate, and when you should begin working with them. If you do use primary materials, work back and forth between them and secondary works, which set the documents or data in context and offer interpretations.

#### REFINING YOUR TOPIC: THE MAIN GOAL FOR EARLY MEETINGS WITH YOUR ADVISER

One reason these early readings are so important is that they help you frame your principal questions and your approach. That's actually the number one goal for these first weeks. *Your chief aim is to refine your thesis topic, to sharpen and delimit your main question.*

You should start distilling and reshaping your topic now, even though you will continue to do so as you research and write. It's not something you do once at the beginning and then put behind you. Honing your topic is

vital to producing a first-rate thesis, and you should keep doing it throughout the thesis project. The question is, how exactly do you refine your topic?

You begin by understanding what makes a thesis topic *manageable*. Some topics, no matter how significant and interesting, are simply too big and amorphous to research well. You can't get your arms around them. You will never really master them, and it's very hard to write a coherent thesis that truly does them justice. That leads to a second point: You need to figure out how to move from a compelling general idea to a *sharply focused topic*, one you can research and analyze within the time available.

**Tip:** Refining your thesis topic is the top priority for the first months of your project. The goal is to move from a general topic to a sharply focused one that you can manage. This should be a major item in early meetings with your adviser.

#### WHAT MAKES A THESIS TOPIC SUCCESSFUL AND MANAGEABLE?

A successful thesis poses an interesting question you can actually answer. Just as important, it poses a question you can answer within the time available for the project.

The question should be one that interests you and deserves exploration. It might be an empirical question or a theoretical puzzle. In some fields, it might be a practical problem or policy issue.

Whatever the question is, you need to mark off its boundaries clearly and intelligently so you can complete the research and not get lost in the woods. That means your topic should be manageable as well as interesting and important.

A topic is manageable if you can

- Master the relevant literature
- Collect and analyze the necessary data
- Answer the key questions you have posed
- Do it all within the time available, with the skills you have

A topic is important if it

- Touches directly on major theoretical issues and debates, or
- Addresses substantive topics of great interest in your field



**Tip:** A successful thesis poses an interesting question you can actually answer within the time available for the project.

Ideally, your topic can do both, engaging theoretical and substantive issues. In elementary education, for example, parents, teachers, scholars, and public officials all debate the effectiveness of charter schools, the impact of vouchers, and the value of different reading programs. A thesis on any of these would resonate within the university and well beyond it. Still, as you approach such topics, you need to limit the scope of your investigation so you can finish your research and writing on time. After all, to be a good thesis, it first has to be a completed thesis.

Some problems are simply too grand, too sweeping to master within the time limits. Some are too minor to interest you or anybody else. This is a Goldilocks problem: you need to find a happy medium.

The solution, however, is *not* to find a lukewarm bowl of porridge, a bland compromise. Nor is it to abandon your interest in larger, more profound issues such as the relationship between school organization and educational achievement or between migration and poverty.

Rather, the solution is to select a well-defined topic that is closely linked to some larger issue and then explore that link. Your thesis will succeed if you nail a well-defined topic. It will rise to excellence if you probe that topic deeply and show how it illuminates wider issues.

**Tip:** The best theses deal with important issues, framed in manageable ways. The goal is to select a well-defined topic that is closely linked to some larger issue and can illuminate it.

You can begin your project with either a large issue or a narrowly defined topic, depending on your interests and the ideas you have generated. Whichever way you start, the goals are the same: to connect the two in meaningful ways and to explore your specific topic in depth.

### MOVING FROM A GENERAL IDEA TO A MANAGEABLE TOPIC

Let's begin as most students actually do, by going from a "big issue" to a more manageable thesis topic. Suppose you start with a big question such as, "Why has the United States fought so many wars since 1945?" That's certainly a big, important question. Unfortunately, it's too complex and sprawling to cover well in a thesis. Working with your adviser, you could zero in on a related but feasible research topic, such as "Why did the Johnson administration choose to escalate the U.S. war in Vietnam?" By choosing this topic, your research can focus on a specific war and, within that, on a few crucial years in the mid-1960s.

You can draw on major works covering all aspects of the Vietnam War and the Johnson administration's decision making. You have access to policy memos that were once stamped top secret. These primary documents have now been declassified, published by the State Department, and made available to research libraries. Many are readily available on the Web. You can also take advantage of top-quality secondary sources (that is, books and articles based on primary documents, interviews, and other research data).

Drawing on these primary and secondary sources, you can uncover and critique the reasons behind U.S. military escalation. As you answer this well-defined question about Vietnam, you can (and you should) return to the larger themes that interest you, namely, "What does the escalation in Southeast Asia tell us about the global projection of U.S. military power since 1945?" As one of America's largest military engagements since World War II, the war in Vietnam should tell us a great deal about the more general question.

The goal here is to pick a good case to study, one that is compelling in its own right and speaks to the larger issue. It need not be a typical example, but it does need to illuminate the larger question. Some cases are better than others precisely because they illuminate larger issues. That's why choosing the best cases makes such a difference in your project. I'll say a bit about that now and discuss it further in chapter 6 ("Using Case Studies Effectively").

Since you are interested in why the United States has fought so often since 1945, you probably shouldn't focus on U.S. invasions of Grenada, Haiti, or Panama in the past two decades. Why? Because the United States has launched numerous military actions against small, weak states in the

Caribbean for more than a century. That is important in its own right, but it doesn't say much about what has changed so dramatically since 1945. The real change since 1945 is the projection of U.S. power far beyond the Western Hemisphere, to Europe and Asia. You cannot explain this change—or any change, for that matter—by looking at something that remains constant.

In this case, to analyze the larger pattern of U.S. war fighting and the shift it represents, you need to pick examples of distant conflicts, such as Korea, Vietnam, Kosovo, Afghanistan, or Iraq. That's the noteworthy change since 1945: U.S. military intervention outside the Western Hemisphere. The United States has fought frequently in such areas since World War II but rarely before then. Alternatively, you could use statistics covering many cases of U.S. intervention around the world, perhaps supplemented with some telling cases studies.

Students in the humanities want to explore their own big ideas, and they, too, need to focus their research. In English literature, their big issue might be “masculinity” or, to narrow the range a bit, “masculinity in Jewish American literature.” Important as these issues are, they are too vast for anyone to read all the major novels plus all the relevant criticism and then frame a comprehensive thesis.

If you don't narrow these sprawling topics and focus your work, you can only skim the surface. Skimming the surface is *not* what you want to do in a thesis. You want to understand your subject in depth and convey that understanding to your readers.

That does not mean you have to abandon your interest in major themes. It means you have to restrict their scope in sensible ways. To do that, you need to think about which aspects of masculinity really interest you and then find works that deal with them.

You may realize your central concern is how masculinity is defined in response to strong women. That focus would still leave you considerable flexibility, depending on your academic background and what you love to read. That might be anything from a reconsideration of *Macbeth* to an analysis of early twentieth-century American novels, where men must cope with women in assertive new roles. Perhaps you are interested in another aspect of masculinity: the different ways it is defined within the same culture at the same moment. That would lead you to novelists who explore these differences in their characters, perhaps contrasting men who come from different backgrounds, work in different jobs, or simply differ emo-

tionally. Again, you would have considerable flexibility in choosing specific writers.

However you refine and narrow your topic, your goals are the same: to make the topic more manageable while still giving yourself the opportunity to explore broad issues that intrigue you.

*Tip:* The goal is not just to narrow your topic. The goal is to narrow it the right way—so your inquiry still matters, so it still offers real insights into larger issues.

#### CONNECTING A SPECIFIC TOPIC TO A BIGGER IDEA

Not all students begin their thesis concerned with big issues such as masculinity or American wars over the past half century. Some show up at their first or second meeting with very specific topics in mind. One example might be the decision to create NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement encompassing Canada, the United States, and Mexico. Perhaps you are interested in NAFTA because you discussed it in a course, heard about it in a political campaign, or saw its effects firsthand on local workers, companies, and consumers. It intrigues you, and you would like to study it in a thesis. The challenge is to go from this clear-cut subject to a larger theme that will frame your project.

Why do you even need to figure out a larger theme? Because NAFTA bears on several major topics, and you cannot explore all of them. Your challenge—and your opportunity—is to figure out which one captures your imagination.

One way to think about that is to finish this sentence: “For me, NAFTA is a case of \_\_\_\_\_.” If you are mainly interested in negotiations between big and small countries, then your answer is, “For me, NAFTA is a case of a large country like the United States bargaining with a smaller neighbor.” Your answer would be different if you are mainly interested in decision making within the United States, Mexico, or Canada. In that case, you might say, “NAFTA seems to be a case where a strong U.S. president pushed a trade policy through Congress.” Perhaps you are more concerned with the role played by business lobbies. “For me, NAFTA is a case of undue corpo-

rate influence over foreign economic policy.” Or you could be interested in the role of trade unions, environmental groups, or public opinion.

The NAFTA decision is related to all these big issues and more. You cannot cover them all. There is not enough time, and even if there were, the resulting paper would be too diffuse, too scattershot. To make an impact, throw a rock, not a handful of pebbles.

Choosing one of these large issues will shape your research on NAFTA. If you are interested in U.S. decision making, for example, you might study the lobbying process or perhaps the differences between Democrats and Republicans. If you are interested in diplomacy, you would focus on negotiations between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Either would be an interesting thesis, but they are *different* theses.

Although the subject matter and analysis are decidedly different in the humanities, many of the same considerations still apply to topic selection. In English or comparative literature, for example, you may be attracted to a very specific topic such as several poems by William Wordsworth. You are not trying, as a social scientist would, to test some generalizations that apply across time or space. Rather, you want to analyze these specific poems, uncover their multiple meanings, trace their allusions, and understand their form and beauty.

As part of this project, however, you may wish to say something bigger, something that goes beyond these particular poems. That might be about Wordsworth’s larger body of work. Are these poems representative or unusual? Do they break with his previous work or anticipate work yet to come? You may wish to comment on Wordsworth’s close ties to his fellow “Lake Poets,” Coleridge and Southey, underscoring some similarities in their work. Do they use language in shared ways? Do they use similar metaphors or explore similar themes? You may even wish to show how these particular poems are properly understood as part of the wider Romantic movement in literature and the arts. Any of these would connect the specific poems to larger themes.

In both the Wordsworth and NAFTA examples, you begin with an interest in a quite specific topic and ultimately link it to larger issues. But the process could just as easily be reversed. You might initially come to your adviser with an interest in economic integration and whittle it down to NAFTA. Or you might come with a general interest in Romantic poets and decide to write your thesis on some specific works by Wordsworth or Coleridge.

**Tip:** If you begin with a well-defined topic, then look for some connections to larger themes. That’s not only important for your conclusions; it will direct your whole approach to the topic, highlighting some aspects instead of others.

You can start with either a big issue or a narrow topic. Either way is fine. A first-rate thesis will eventually make some connections between the two, between a well-defined topic and a more encompassing theme.

#### WRITING A THESIS PROPOSAL

Now that you know what makes an interesting, manageable thesis, you also know the main points to include in a proposal. It should briefly explain *why it is interesting* and *how you are going to manage it*.

Different departments have different rules for proposals, saying when they are due (usually near the end of junior year or the beginning of senior year) and how long they should be (usually a page or two). You can find out the specifics from a departmental administrator or perhaps from the department’s Web site. It’s essential to know these administrative details, and you should find them out now. But they are separate from the intellectual issues I cover here.

Whatever the department regulations, *all* proposals need to contain a few key points about what you intend to do. In clear, concise language, your proposal should explain

- What your main question or topic is
- Why it matters
- How you plan to approach the analysis

The proposal should briefly state your topic, its importance to your field, and the way you intend to analyze it. The trick is to be brief without being vague.

What you need *not* do is answer the hard questions you pose. That’s not the job of the proposal. That’s the job of the thesis itself. If you can already answer the main questions you pose, then they are probably the wrong ones. You should pose other, more challenging questions.



**Tip:** Your thesis proposal should outline your topic, its importance, and your approach to studying it. It should pose one or two major questions, but it does not need to answer them. The thesis itself will do that.

One way to explain your topic's importance is to describe current debates surrounding it and how leading scholars treat it. Are there major disputes among theorists or practitioners? What is at stake in these debates? If your topic is not particularly prominent, then you should say why it deserves more attention. What's wrong with just ignoring it? In some fields, such as medical ethics, environmental regulation, or educational policy, you should also underscore the topic's practical significance. Does it affect many people or perhaps affect a few with great intensity?

Once you have identified an important question and stated it clearly, you need to say how you will examine it. Again, you are not trying to answer the question. You are saying how you intend to find the answer. You need to show that the investigation is a manageable task and is likely to yield answers. You may wish to illustrate your approach with a little preliminary analysis, probably only a paragraph or two.

In the social sciences, you should also mention what data you will use. Do you plan to use case studies, interviews, large databases, original documents, or some combination of these? Will this be more a quantitative study or a qualitative one?

In the humanities and less quantitative social sciences, you should say which primary texts you will study, such as Wordsworth's early poems or Abigail Adams's letters. Will you be studying particular drawings by Leonardo or particular movies by Tarantino? If you plan to rely on (or contend with) some major secondary works, such as several major books about Wordsworth, mention that and explain how they fit into your project.

Normally, a thesis proposal does not mention your academic background or special skills unless they directly affect your planned research. (That is why I suggested you list them separately for your adviser.) For instance, you would not mention that you have taken advanced statistics courses, but you might mention the techniques you plan to use for data analysis. For a thesis on World War II in the Pacific, you might say that you will rely on important documents in the original Japanese. If these documents have never been translated, be sure to mention it. It shows the

excitement and originality of your project. In discussing these skills, your goal is never to show off. It is to show *what* you will study and *how* you will study it.

## REVISING YOUR PROPOSAL

Getting your adviser to approve your proposal is often seen as just a bureaucratic hurdle, yet another dull requirement among so many you have to meet in college. In fact, it can be much more useful to you. A good proposal would be worth doing even if it were not required, because it will start your thesis research on the right path.

That's also why it is valuable to *revise* your proposal, to make sure it lays out the research questions intelligently and explains how you intend to study them. Few departments require these revisions, but they are still worth doing to make certain the project is well conceived at the outset.

You can learn a great deal from drafting a proposal, discussing it, and revising it in response to faculty comments. Trying to explain your project will help you understand it better. Discussing it with faculty will help, too, because your adviser's suggestions and clarifications come at a critical moment, while you are still framing your focal questions and your basic approach.

That is why, if you have time, you should do more than ask for your adviser's approval and signature. You should meet to discuss a first draft of your proposal and incorporate the comments in a revised version. Then return to discuss it before moving on to more focused research. The draft proposal and its revisions will point you in the right direction.

**Tip:** Revising your proposal is well worth the time. It will help you clarify your topic, your questions, and your approach. It will point you in the right direction as you begin the project.

This is a perfect time to think about the project as a whole and how you will approach it. Your revised proposal should reflect your reappraisal, putting you in a much stronger position to launch your research. That is why revisions are standard operating procedures for much larger projects such as dissertation proposals. They can aid your thesis for exactly the same reasons. By treating your proposal thoughtfully, you are doing more than

simply clearing another bureaucratic hurdle. You are molding and improving your project at its most pliable moment.

#### REFINING YOUR TOPIC WITH ADVISERS AND WORKSHOPS

As this chapter makes clear, one of your adviser's most valuable contributions is to help you refine your topic. She can help you select the best cases for detailed study or the best data and statistical techniques for quantitative projects. She can help you find cases that shed light on larger questions, have good data available, and are discussed in a rich secondary literature. She may know valuable troves of documents to explore. That's why it is so important to bring these issues up in early meetings. These discussions with your adviser are crucial in moving from a big but ill-defined idea to a smart, feasible topic.

**Tip:** Begin sharpening your question and refining your topic early in the project. Your adviser can play a vital role in this crucial early stage.

Some colleges supplement this advising process by offering special workshops and tutorial support for thesis students. These are great resources, and you should take full advantage of them. They can improve your project in at least three ways.

First, tutors and workshop leaders are usually quite adept at helping you focus and shape your topic. That's what they do best. Even if they are relatively new teachers, they have been writing papers themselves for many years. They know how to do it well and how to avoid common mistakes. To craft their own papers, they have learned how to narrow their topics, gather data, interpret sources, and evaluate conjectures. They know how to use appropriate methods and how to mine the academic literature. In all these ways, they can assist you with their own hard-won experience. To avoid any confusion, just make sure your main faculty adviser knows what advice you are getting from workshop leaders and tutors. You want everyone to be pulling in the same direction.

Second, you will benefit enormously from batting around your project in workshops. The more you speak about your subject, the better you will understand it yourself. The better you understand it, the clearer your research and writing will be. You will learn about your project as you pre-

sent your ideas; you will learn more as you listen to others discuss your work; and you will learn still more as you respond to their suggestions. Although you should do that in sessions with your adviser, you will also profit from doing it in workshops and tutorial sessions.

Third, workshops, tutors, and other readers remind you that you are writing for an audience. This is a vital lesson for all writers. Others will read your work, and it should be directed toward them. (By the way, in good thesis workshops, students read each others' work and take it seriously. That's probably what differentiates them from mediocre workshops, where students don't bother to read each others' work, so they cannot provide helpful, informed comments.)

If you want to imagine a good target audience, think about juniors and seniors in your major and intelligent laypeople who are not specialists in your area. Of course, some topics go beyond the technical expertise of ordinary educated readers. If that's true for your topic, then focus on an audience of fellow thesis writers in your major.

**Tip:** Take full advantage of thesis workshops to get feedback on your project. They offer

- Evaluations from skilled workshop leaders
- Opportunities for you to discuss your project
- Comments from fellow students about your work
- A constant reminder that you must convey your ideas to others

#### ZEROING IN ON YOUR READINGS

With your topic better defined, your reading can now become more sharply focused. Remember to add any new articles you read to your bibliography so you can discuss them with your adviser and cite them later.

**Tip:** As your project develops, your reading should become more tightly focused.

You will inevitably find that a few articles you read are worthless, some are too complex, and still others are unrelated to your topic, despite their



promising titles. Jot that down in your working bibliography so you don't forget and waste time next month tracking down the same useless articles. Similarly, when you photocopy an article or check out a book, note that briefly in your bibliography file. Marking up your bibliography with personal comments like this makes it more than a list of works for eventual citation. It becomes your working guide for day-to-day research.

**Tip:** Your bibliography should be a *working* document, a day-to-day guide for your research.

- Record full information for later citation.
- Mark up your list with comments next to various items.
- Divide your reading list into sections, reflecting the different subtopics you are working on.

Besides annotating your bibliography, you might begin dividing it into sections. For the Vietnam War thesis, for instance, you might have one set of readings on "the Johnson administration's decision making," another on "military advice," and still another on "U.S. opponents of escalation." These divisions may also help you think about how you will eventually organize the paper. The divisions in your bibliography could well become sections in your paper.

#### **Examples of a working bibliography (earlier and later versions):**

##### **Early version of bibliography on U.S. war in Vietnam:**

- David Kaiser, *American Tragedy* FULL TITLE?? (City?? Publisher?? 2000).  
 Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983).  
 Neil Sheehan, *A Bright, Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (City?? Publisher?? Year??).

**Later, annotated version of bibliography on U.S. war in Vietnam** (includes full citations; organized into subtopics with comments on different readings):

##### **Earlier accounts:**

- Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking, 1983).  
 DS558.K370 1983 (at main library only)  
 Not read yet

Neil Sheehan, *A Bright, Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

DS558.S470 1988

War as seen through the transformation of one soldier; useful and filled with personal detail but superseded by treatments that use recently released documents. (Skimmed; some notes)

##### Recent histories of U.S. policy, based on newly released documents:

David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).  
 DS558.K35 2000 (at main library and law school)  
 Excellent treatment; uses full official documents; supplements Logevall because it also covers the Kennedy administration's role. (Read about half book so far, with good notes)

Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

DS558.L6 1999 (I purchased)

Probably the best single treatment I've read on the Johnson administration's decision to escalate. Covers only the period 1963–65; analyzes U.S. decision making rather than the war itself. (Read whole book; thorough notes)

Need to read *Foreign Relations of the United States* volumes for Vietnam policy in early to mid-1960s (Reading Room 2 at main library and law library: JX233.A3). Check to see if these are online.

Keep marking up and reorganizing your bibliography as you take notes and work in the library and online.

#### **BE AN ACTIVE READER**

As you continue to read and learn, join the dialogue in your field. Think of yourself as a participant in your field's larger discourse. Authors talk back and forth to each other through their written work. Notice how they do it in your area of interest. In what ways do they agree, disagree, emphasize different issues, and build on each other's work? What is their conversation about? How do they conduct it?

*Your goal is to be an alert reader, not a passive recipient.* Pay special attention to theoretical arguments and analytic perspectives, as well as the evidence that authors marshal to support their ideas. Look for styles to imitate, questions to ask, and research designs to follow. The best articles should serve as silent teachers, models for your own work. But they can teach only if you seek to learn. That's an active process.

Active reading is easier than you might think. I pay closer attention to others' work when I'm busy doing research myself, probably for the same reasons I'm more alert to new cars when I am thinking of buying one. All around me, I suddenly notice sunroofs, taillights, and wheel covers—details I usually ignore—and realize that I want my new car to have some features and not others. Similarly, as I research and write, I notice the meaningful details of others' work and try to learn from them. You will probably notice the same things as you work on your thesis. If you foster this learning process by trying to read actively and critically, you will discover even more.

#### WRITE A SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

As you conclude your background reading, consider writing a brief essay (perhaps three to five pages) on the readings you've done so far. The essay serves several purposes. First, it draws together the readings you've done so far. You'll understand the terrain much better as you then begin more focused research and reading. Second, a brief essay like this is an excellent topic for discussion, either with your adviser or in a thesis workshop. There is a clear agenda: where do the major authors in your area agree and disagree? Third, it invites you to begin thinking about where you stand in this debate. Finally, it prompts you to begin writing as a regular part of your thesis project.

Don't postpone putting your ideas on paper for months, waiting to complete all your research and begin a first draft. Far better to write several short pieces as you go along, each of them covering discrete aspects of your work. I'll make the same suggestion later, after you've divided your paper topic into its major sections. You can write separate informal papers on each section. Parts of these papers, beginning with your bibliographic essay, will find their way into your first draft.

**Tip:** Write a three- to five-page paper on your background readings, concentrating on major areas of agreement and disagreement among the authors. As you lay out this terrain, begin thinking about where you stand.

#### THESIS TIME SCHEDULE

To keep your work on track, it helps to have a target time schedule. I've included one here for the first couple of months, based on the assumption that you have a couple of semesters (or quarters) to complete the thesis.

This is not a rigid schedule. It's a rough guide to the progress you should be making through various stages of thesis research and writing. Of course, individual projects differ, and you should discuss your own timing with your adviser and workshop leaders. Don't discuss it once at the beginning and then consider it settled. Bring it up occasionally as your thesis project moves along. The schedule I've included here can serve as a starting point for that continuing discussion and for drafting a schedule suited to your project.

I'll update this schedule as we move further into thesis research and writing. For now, the main point is that you should spend the first couple of months doing general reading about your topic, formulating a draft proposal, and then revising it with feedback from your adviser.

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#### TIME SCHEDULE FOR MONTHS 1, 2: THESIS PROPOSAL AND BACKGROUND READING

Reading:	Background reading
Writing:	Proposal and revised proposal Bibliographic essay

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#### CHECKLIST: REFINING YOUR TOPIC AND BEGINNING RESEARCH

- Meet regularly with your adviser.
- Establish standard times and other arrangements for these meetings.
- Think of your own agenda for each meeting.
- Try to bring some written work to most meetings.



- Bring two copies of all written materials (with name, e-mail address, and date).
- Take advantage of thesis workshops.
- Narrow your general ideas to make the thesis manageable.
- Write a first draft of your thesis proposal.
- Revise your thesis proposal, based on feedback from your adviser.
- Search for connections between your manageable idea and larger issues in your field.
- Zero in on readings directly related to your thesis project.
- Create a working bibliography and keep it up-to-date.
- Conclude your background readings by writing a three- to five-page paper.
  - It should outline the main debates in your field and associate specific authors with different positions.
  - If you have a perspective on these debates, include it.



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## Conducting Your Research