Move from research question to working thesis

As you preview sources and consider what you already know, aim to draft a statement of your working thesis and what you believe your research will show.

For an overview of related key topics on planning a paper, visit the videos and quizzes in this tutorial.

Explore It

In the important early stages of a research project, you choose and assess a topic, considering your own stance and knowledge of it, while taking some time to consider the audience for your project. You'll also do some preliminary reading of a variety of sources to ensure your topic is worthwhile and to understand the many sides of your topic.

After you have previewed some potential sources and gathered information, you are ready to work with the main question you have about your topic—your research question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>Colleges and employers screen applicants using Facebook</td>
<td>Is it right for employers and college admissions staff to use Facebook as a means of screening candidates?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Legalizing medical marijuana</td>
<td>What effects does legalizing medical marijuana have on adolescent drug use?</td>
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<td>Video game violence and school shootings</td>
<td>What statements do violent video games make about shooting violence in our schools?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texting while driving</td>
<td>Should texting while driving be illegal?</td>
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A working thesis takes the research question and turns it into a statement of the main point you want to make about your topic. The working thesis is a starting point that helps you decide which sources are most applicable to your project. As you sort through the ideas in your sources and think more about your own ideas, your working thesis will help you decide which ideas to emphasize and how to organize them. Usually your thesis is a single sentence that expresses a clear, arguable statement of your paper's main idea.
Learn It

The research question you formulate and use to guide your search for sources can also be used to help you form your working thesis. The working thesis should name your topic and also spell out what you are going to cover in your research paper. The research question above about employers and colleges using Facebook to screen candidates could be turned into this preliminary working thesis:

Preliminary Working Thesis
Colleges and employers should not access the Facebook accounts of qualified applicants.

This thesis states the topic but is less clear about the argument the student plans to make. The thesis also lacks specifics, and does not hint at the case the paper will make about the subject.

Revised Working Thesis
Colleges and employers who access the Facebook accounts of qualified applicants should disclose their practices, especially to minors.

A good working thesis makes a comment or claim about the topic. For the example Facebook thesis, the student makes a specific claim—that employers and colleges should be transparent about how they use information about applicants found on Facebook. The thesis also suggests the student’s attitude and approach to the topic.

Your working thesis should clearly state what you plan to claim and it should summarize the stand you plan to take or what your research paper will conclude.

The working thesis should also reflect the work you’ve done to narrow your topic. Your thesis should be narrowed and appropriate to the length and scope of your research project. For example, a research project on all the effects of violence in video games would be too broad and time-consuming. Like your topic, your thesis should be as specific as possible.

The thesis should present a single idea that will unify your writing, and in your final draft it should guide readers through your paper. And so your working thesis should take into account the supporting information you’ve gathered. The knowledge you gain from reading your sources needs to be reflected in your thesis. You will need to reevaluate the thesis as you research and write: it will likely change as you draft. You may need to qualify your thesis, that is, specify the conditions under which it is true, to reflect evidence that you uncover as you conduct research. For example, you may not be able to conclude with total certainty that medical marijuana legalization poses no additional threat to adolescents. You might need to add qualifying terms to your statement to show that your research shows the threat is “not significant” or is “unlikely.” You may even find that your initial stance is not supported by the evidence, in which case, your revised thesis would need to change more dramatically.

Use It

Choose a topic from a current research project and keep in mind what you know about the audience for the final research paper. Look over your working bibliography and reflect on the preliminary research and reading you have done. Think about what position you want to take on your topic—what is the basic point or claim you want to make? Pose a research question that is manageable and appropriately focused.

Then formulate a preliminary working thesis. Evaluate it in terms of its clarity and specificity and how manageable it will be in the context of your assignment. Also consider whether it is interesting, making sure it is not overly broad or vague. You may want to present it to a classmate or other writing partner for feedback.