

How to Choose a Term Paper Topic

What is a term paper?

A term paper should pose a *research question* and then do research to try to answer it. A term paper should also have a *thesis*—a position or argument that answers the question. The question and thesis should be stated early in the paper. The body of the paper will consist of the evidence that you have gathered to support your thesis. You will develop your thesis as you do the research.

Here are some things that are unacceptable:

1. A paper about a general topic, rather than a specific question.
2. A summary of what other people think, without any evaluation by you.
3. A paper about what you think, unsupported by evidence.
4. A paper not related to the course

Posing a research question

Note the difference between a general topic (the Civil War, hunter-gatherer economics, witchcraft) and a research question (why did the North win in the Civil War? why are hunter-gatherers economically egalitarian? which types of societies practice witchcraft?). The research questions make good subjects for a term paper, and make it easy to develop a thesis. The general topics do not. This is true for all term papers.

“Why” questions are usually good evolutionary psychology questions. “How” questions can also be suitable, if the emphasis is on the adaptive significance of something rather than solely the mechanism involved. “What” and “which” questions are suitable for this class only if the answer is interpreted using an evolutionary argument.

A good research question is also one that can be answered, at least in principle, with evidence. Finally, and more practically, it must be something about which evidence exists, or can be collected.

Testing a hypothesis

You can do a good term paper even if you don’t have a clue about the answer to your research question when you begin. However, you may well have a hunch about the answer because of explanations that have been suggested in class. These suggested explanations are hypotheses, and you can usually make a more effective term paper if you focus on one (or a few) specific hypotheses.

Here, for example, are a couple of research questions:

1. Are there differences in the way men and women navigate?
2. Why do some societies have menstrual huts?

Each of these would make a suitable, if broad, research question, but focusing on a specific hypothesis will make a better, more focused research question.

For example:

Are there differences in the way men and women navigate? This question could come from personal experience, but you may remember from class the hypothesis that men navigate by dead reckoning (and give directions in terms of distance and direction) while women pay more attention to landmarks (and their directions mention more landmarks). You could see whether other studies support this, and perhaps replicate the study by collecting data of your own (see below).

Why do some societies have menstrual huts? Perhaps you have read a paper by Strassman showing that menstrual huts among the Dogon allow men to control the fertility of their wives. Strassman's hypothesis is true for the Dogon, but you want to know if it is generally true. Do menstrual huts function this way in other cultures that have them?

Collecting your own data

You will always need to look at what other people have written on the topic, but some hypotheses will be suitable for original data collection, either by doing a fieldwork project, or by using the existing cross-cultural literature (through the eHRAF and other ethnographic sources). You should check with me to make sure that original data collection is ok, though.

For example, if you want to see whether men and women really do give directions differently, you can ask a sample of people to give directions to the same place and see whether there is a systematic difference.

Or, using the other hypothesis, you can use the eHRAF and read about other societies with menstrual huts, and see whether the women in those societies are always under their husband's control, or not.

If you decide to collect your own data for the term paper, I will not expect anything more than a small amount of data, and will not expect scientific levels of research design. I will expect you to clear your data collection ideas with me, however, before you begin.

You might also find the following site helpful. Go to step two, and focus on their explanation of types of questions.

<http://www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/~agraham/guides/termpaper.htm#type3>