How to Choose a Term Paper Topic

A term paper must 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.

One excellent, original approach to a term paper will derive a hypothesis from the theory we have discussed in class, and evaluate the hypothesis with evidence, either from the literature or from your own data collection. A hypothesis is really just a fancy term for a hunch about the answer to your research question. The key here is that the hypothesis should come from theory, not thin air.

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.

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.
4. A paper not related to the course.
5. The wrong sort of question (see below).

What is a good research question?

The following guidelines may be helpful. They are from:

What is a good research question? This webguide distinguish three types of questions:

1. questions of fact (Who wrote Wuthering Heights?)
2. questions of opinion (What’s your favorite kind of music?)
3. questions of judgement (Why do people perform criminal acts?).

Only the third of these is suitable for a term paper.

They go on to say:

A question like this doesn’t really have a right or a wrong answer. The best you can do to answer it is to go to the library, read up on what various sociologists, criminologists, and others have concluded. You might find that a particular group of psychologists believe they can prove that criminal activity is the result of brain chemistry imbalances. A sociologist might tell you that criminal behaviour is caused by the way society tries to box people. You might be tempted to answer "I don't know."

Okay, so you don’t know. How might you find out the answer to this question? You have to do some research and think about what all those authors are saying, decide who is the most convincing
to you, and explain clearly why it’s convincing. Supposing you came to the conclusion that people perform criminal acts because they were forced, as children, to be nice to the cat. (Okay, that’s stupid, but that doesn’t matter; it’s just an example.)

If someone were to say to you, once you told them your conclusion, ”Oh, yeah? prove it,” what do you think you’d say to convince them that you are right? You have to have some facts to back up your conclusion and you’d have to explain to your doubting friend why those particular facts are meaningful. You read about the results of a survey that reached this conclusion and there was this other book that said the same thing. Of course there were other books that said it was because of chemical imbalances but perhaps the chemical imbalances were caused by being forced to be nice to the cat. You, in defending your conclusion, are constructing an argument. You’re marshalling your ”evidence” and presenting it in such a way that your friend can’t help but be convinced...

Remember that Type Three questions do not necessarily have one right answer; they tend to have many possible right answers.

Each of these possible explanations is a ”hypothesis,” a possible answer to the question. A hypothesis is “a supposition made as a starting point for further investigation from known facts”… (Oxford Canadian Dictionary). Any one of our explanations might be true. We don’t know yet.

After we’ve done some reading and decide on one of them, we have a thesis. A thesis is an answer to a judgement-type question. A thesis, according to the Oxford Canadian Dictionary, is “a position to be maintained [supported] or proved.”