Thinking Like a Researcher
Developing Your Project with *The Craft of Research*

Brought to you by the *Writing*center at Washington College

Research begins with curiosity. You might have chosen your topic simply because it intrigues you and you want to know more about it. However, translating that personal interest into a specific, focused research project, one that will matter to your readers, requires three key steps outlined in chapters 3-5 of *The Craft of Research*.

You will base the argument of your project (parts III and IV of *The Craft of Research*) upon the questions and problems you raise and the solution you propose, supported by your sources.

From Topics to Questions

As you focus your topic, you need to raise questions before turning to sources related to the topic. For example: How does this topic compare/contrast with others like it? How would things be different if this topic never existed? And most importantly: *So What?* Why is the research you are engaging in worth your reader's attention?

The Craft of Research provides a useful 3-part template [p. 48] for identifying the research question that will move your project toward answering *So What?*

1. **Topic: I am studying _____X_____**
2. **Question: because I want to find out what/why/how _____Y_____**
3. **Significance: in order to help my reader better understand _____Z_____**

From Questions to a Problem

It's not enough simply to answer your research question. You will need to persuade readers that yours is a question worth posing and answering. To do this you need a problem worth solving. For instance, you can ask problem-oriented questions like these: *What has been misunderstood or neglected in discussions of this topic? What do you or others disagree with in the current or conventional understanding of the topic? How might you expand or rethink the conventional understanding of your topic?*

The Craft of Research provides a template you can use to map the basic argument in your sources and in the project you are developing (see Chapter 16, pages 232-234, for more information):

1. **Context/Topic:**
2. **Problem:**
3. **Response:**

From Problem to Sources

You can identify and refine your problem as engage with your sources. As you read, map out how other researchers pose the questions and problems of their projects. Then, think about how your particular research will offer a response to the question(s) you pose and a solution to your research problem. What are the benefits to approaching the problem the way you are? What is the overall structure of your argument, and what will readers need to know to understand your approach?

Here are 5 essential strategies for engaging with your sources, focusing on the questions your project will raise and the problem it seeks to solve.

1) Defining Terms:
* What terms or concepts are most essential to your topic?
* Does an understanding of your topic depend on *how* you define certain terms?

2) Locating Controversy:
* What are the most essential points of conflict or debate concerning your topic?
* Where do your ideas fit into the arguments that others have made about your topic?

3) Identifying Gaps
* What have others missed or overlooked in discussions of your topic?
* What does applying a new perspective or idea to your topic reveal?

4) Responding to Critics
* Who might disagree with the approach you've taken to your topic?
* How can you identify and respond to those who might disagree with you?

5) Answering the "So What?" of Your Argument:
* Ultimately, why is your topic important or worth studying? Why does it matter?
* What does your approach offer that is currently missing from discussions of your topic?