



CHOOSING A DISSERTATION TOPIC

Perhaps it's more productive and less misleading to think of this task in terms of creating rather than finding or choosing a dissertation topic. Finding or choosing a topic suggests that the topics are out there, and all you have to do is to stumble across a good one. These terms highlight knowledge outside of you. Creating a topic is more about you, your experience, and what you would like to contribute to scholarly thought in your field of study.

The following are useful to keep in mind as you go about creating your dissertation topic.

1. It's never too early to start thinking about your topic. Deciding on a topic early on in your graduate career will help maximize the benefits from each course you take. It may even help you select appropriate courses to take. Your reading, and every opportunity to do independent research, will be focused and purposeful. Granted, your topic will continue to develop (change) as you work on it, but you'll have a good start.
2. It takes some soul searching to know what you are really interested in. It also takes knowledge of the current state of a topic to know that your contributions are going to be relevant. Carry a notebook dedicated to dissertation ideas or start a computer file. The purpose is to keep your ideas in one place, and to add your reflections as you read about your topic and continue to refine these ideas. The "aha! moment" may come on a walk, in the shower, or upon falling asleep at night. The goal is to always write these thoughts down.
3. To warrant the degree you are seeking, your topic should be original. This means that you have to figure out if your research project has been done before. To do so, you need to stay on top of current



conversations in your academic field. The most recent issues of a peer-reviewed journals and conference presentations are good ways to get familiar with the current conversations and to figure out the gaps that your scholarship needs to address.

4. To remain sane and avoid the prolonged agony of a permanent ABD status, you need to create a manageable project. Graduate students tend to be too ambitious. To address my personal problem with ambition, my advisor promised me that I wouldn't turn immediately illiterate after writing my dissertation. She was right. Theses and dissertations are the beginning of your academic career, not the end. Choosing something that you can manage in a couple of years is a worthy enough contribution to begin with.
5. Think of manageability in terms of time, skills, and resources. Make lists of these. For example, do you have access to the population that your research studies? Do you know enough about the methodologies you tend to apply? These lists can easily become action items for courses to take and community members to contact.
6. Be strategic as you think of your topic. Does it interest others? Can you find an excellent advisor to guide you? Does it position you well for a job that you'd like to do?
7. Talk about your ideas. Part of your professors' job is to guide you through your independent research. Don't hesitate to contact them even if it's early in your thinking process. Professors' schedules are often overtaxed with advanced students, yet they tend to welcome interesting conversations during their scheduled office hours.
8. Talk with your thesis/dissertation consultant. He/she is always available to listen to you and provide genuine feedback.



9. Try it out. If you have an idea for a topic, submit it to conferences. It's great to establish professional relationships outside your academic institution, and conference presentations can generate useful feedback, tips, and resources.

References:

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