Title of Module: The Early Stages of Research

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Video 1: Introduction: Understanding research and your assignment

Introduction to Research and this Module

This module will give you an introduction to the early stages of research. You will learn strategies to help you understand your particular assignment, find a topic, and narrow your topic. You will also learn how to develop questions from initial topics and from different types of sources. Although you may watch this module and the other module focused on research in a linear fashion, you will likely find that you repeat some of the skills at different points in the process. You are welcome to return to various points in the videos at any time.

Research is not about collecting all the data about a topic you can find, listing or summarizing disconnected facts about a broad topic, or finding the perfect source that says exactly what you want to say.

Research is about finding debates that you want to join through your own analysis of sources you want to explore. The research process can be very challenging, but it is also an opportunity to discover and create fascinating connections between ideas that interest you, and to share those connections with others through a variety of forms.

The range of research

For most research assignments, you will be required to develop an argument that incorporates a claim, reasons, evidence, and acknowledgment and response just like claim-driven papers that use only in-class readings as sources. You will not fulfill the assignment if you only summarize data and arguments from sources you find.

In this module, we'll discuss some research strategies that can transfer across different situations. As you gain more experience with research, you will develop specific strategies that often work well for you. However, not every research challenge you face at BU or after will have the same structure or requirements. Although experience with research will help you in future research projects, flexibility based on the particular challenges of each project is extremely important.

Even research papers with the same structures and requirements can involve different research processes depending on the particular topic, text or set of issues you are exploring. To be a successful researcher, be open to exploring new ideas and to learning new skills and strategies. Unexpected discoveries can temporarily make the work more challenging, but they also make research more rewarding. A strategy that worked well for one project may not work for another. Allowing research to transform your understanding of a topic, acquiring and experimenting with a range of strategies, and reflecting on the strengths and limitations of different approaches will give you the versatility to meet diverse challenges.

Understanding your assignment

Due to differences between particular assignments, it is important to make sure that you listen to your professor and read all assignment sheets as well as any other information provided to you. After listening to a professor discuss requirements and reading through the assignment sheet for the first time, you may feel overwhelmed by the information. Keep your assignment sheet with you throughout the process. Go back, read again, and take in the information in smaller pieces. Identify the key concepts and tasks that make up the assignment. Absorb the organizational structure of the assignment sheet so that you know where to double-check for particular information, but also so that you understand connections between different parts of your assignment and can grasp the whole process.

Here are some potential questions that can help you gather important initial information about a research project with the help of an assignment sheet and your professor:
Are there particular types of sources required?
Is there a specific number of sources required?
Are you required to use specific research methods?
Are there in-class texts you are required to use?
Are there in-class texts you can use if you choose?
Do you need to find all outside sources through your own research?

How will you be required to use the sources you find?
How will you be required to present the data you find?
How will you be required to use summary and analysis?

If you have questions after reading the assignment sheet, email your professor, talk to your professor during or after class, or schedule a meeting during office hours to address those questions as soon as you can. Do not create a situation in which you have invested much time and energy into your work, but have not fulfilled the assignment.

Video 2: Finding and Formulating a Topic

Finding a Topic

As part of your research assignment, you may be given a particular topic, provided with a list of topics from which to choose, or told to find a topic on your own. If you have some background knowledge about your topic, you may immediately be able to think of specific questions that can lead you to a claim, reasons, and evidence. If you know very little about your topic, your initial questions should focus on developing your knowledge base before you write a working research question and claim.

In many classes, even if you have some freedom to choose your topic, you will be required to write a research paper that connects to the course. Although it is important to make sure you pursue a topic that fulfills the assignment, you will likely write a stronger paper if you have interest in what you are exploring. After you read through your assignment sheet, figure out how you can pursue a topic that will fulfill the requirements and make you feel excited about the research.

Asking yourself a few questions can help you to find a topic. How can you connect course topics to personal interests? What concepts are you curious to learn more about? Is there a debate related to this course that you have enjoyed discussing with friends? What kinds of research relating to this class might help you achieve your career aspirations? Look back through notes on course readings and think about what interested or surprised you.

Using the Internet for Inspiration

You probably use Google searches in order to find a variety of information in your daily life. An internet search can be helpful if you are working on a research topic that you know very little about. But it's essential to evaluate each website you visit and to keep a record of them.

Even when you are looking for background information that you do not intend to use directly in your paper, focus on websites created by established organizations and individuals who have professional and scholarly qualifications you can confirm. Look for websites that have bibliographies of other reliable sources that you can evaluate.

Avoid websites that make it difficult to tell who is responsible for the information and that do not clearly establish the relevant educational backgrounds or professional experience of their creators. Do not use websites that provide information but do not clearly acknowledge sources. Taking data from a website that is not authoritative makes your argument less credible and less convincing.

Even if you just use the internet for initial ideas, you still need to verify the accuracy of ideas you find that shape your further research. You also need to be careful that data from websites you look at does not appear in your paper uncited. Even if the data is accurate, which it may not be, you will still be plagiarizing if you take ideas from a website you skimmed during your first phase of research.

You can use reliable websites to find a general topic for research, such as recent deforestation in Brazil or the portrayal of gender roles on a specific television show. You cannot take the central focus or structure of your argument from a website you visit. Major elements in your paper such as your claim and reasons need to be your own. Taking these aspects of argumentation from a website and using them in your paper is plagiarism.

Narrowing Your Topic

Unless your professor has assigned you a topic that is already very specific, as you build knowledge about a potential topic, you will need to make the topic more manageable to develop a research question that can lead you to a specific claim.

For example, let's say you are assigned a 2000-word research paper and you want to write about different cultures' responses to cats. By adding the concept of culture, you have already narrowed the focus from a very broad topic – cats. But you still need to make your focus much more specific. You could narrow your focus to one particular culture or two cultures if you can justify a comparison between them. You should also choose a particular time period on which to focus. You could further narrow this topic depending on what specific sources you want to analyze. Many different sources such as photographs, news reports, fiction, films, merchandise, paintings, historical documents, poetry, sculpture, and real-life observations of cats could be analyzed in a research paper focused on this topic.

Narrowing your topic is important, but even specific topics cannot help you to choose precisely enough the particular data to use and how you should analyze that data. Writing a draft with only a topic to direct your research will often cause a data dump – a set of barely connected facts with little analysis. Readers will wonder what the point of your writing is if you do not have a strong question and claim. A draft of this kind will make it difficult for you to write a strong final version of your paper.

Early in your research it is important to move from a topic toward a working research question or possibly a set of related research questions. Later in the process you may need to do more

background reading, but try to move close to the kinds of questions that can lead you to claims as soon as possible.

Video 3: Developing Questions from Topics and Sources

Questions from Topics

Early in your research it is important to move from a topic toward a working research question or possibly a set of related research questions. Later in the process you may need to do more background reading, but try to move close to the kinds of questions that can lead you to claims as soon as possible.

There are two types of research questions that lead to claims: practical questions and conceptual questions. Practical questions address what we should do about a problem and how we can change, improve, or fix a particular situation. Conceptual questions explore what or how we should think about a problem by helping us understand it more deeply and thoroughly.

To return to our topic from the previous video, we could develop many different questions involving specific cultures' responses to cats. Here are two examples. First, a practical question: Japanese culture reveres cats and there are many cat cafés in the country. Given contrasts between how Japanese and Americans view cats, what different actions should be taken to create a successful business of this kind in the United States?

Second, a conceptual question: The documentary *Kedi* portrays the significance of cats in Istanbul, Turkey. What roles do modern secular Turkish culture, Islam, and more ancient beliefs play in the spiritual bonds humans perceive between themselves and cats in the film? These questions make possible more focused research than the topic, but they would still need to be further revised to be made more specific for a 2000-word paper.

Different Source Types

Your professor may require or allow you to begin developing questions based on in-class readings before you search for outside sources. It is most likely that you will start your research project by reading an in-class source as either an exhibit, argument, or theory source. An exhibit is the central text or object you analyze or interpret in a paper. An argument source is a text that advances arguable claims to which you respond. A theory source provides a framework of concepts you can use in your analysis.

Questions from Exhibit Sources

If you are starting from an in-class exhibit source, it is often helpful to look for elements of the source that surprised you or violated your expectations in some way. These aspects might be in the content of the exhibit. They could also be features of its larger structure or details in the

style of parts of the exhibit.

Questions from Argument and Theory Sources

If you are starting from an in-class argument source, you can look for gaps in the argument or areas where you feel you want to talk back. Where does the argument use others' ideas as support and where does it challenge other arguments? What counterarguments does it acknowledge and respond to? How does it respond? Do you find the responses convincing? What counterarguments does it not acknowledge that you think it should have? How can you acknowledge and respond to those counterarguments through an analysis of your exhibit?

You cannot create a strong argument by completely agreeing with another argument and using its claims it to analyze the same text and context.

But you can potentially transfer concepts or a framework used in an argument about one text or context to another text or context. When you make this move, you will be using the source as a theory source.

Well-chosen theory and argument sources are very important to research projects because they help you to move beyond the general topics and questions that characterize early phases of research, making it possible for you to develop a clear niche for your argument within a larger debate or set of conversations.