



## EXPLORING TOPICS & CREATING A RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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In this chapter, we will follow student Jasmine Huerta through her research process. Note that the process Jasmine uses is a typical research process, but it is not the only process. Many researchers do things in a different order, utilize different strategies, and so on. The more you research, the more you will tailor processes to fit you and what works for you.

## Considering Your Rhetorical Situation

As with everything you compose, you should start by thinking about your rhetorical situation—your purpose and audience. If you are responding to a research assignment, your instructor may have stipulated a particular purpose and audience, or you may be able to choose those on your own. Sometimes instructors also stipulate what types of sources need to be used. Be sure you understand what your instructor expects and how much latitude you have to make choices.

## Choosing a Topic Through Basic Research

The Internet offers an unlimited source of topics, and beginning your reading can be exciting but overwhelming: You can easily locate millions of resources on any topic simply by doing a quick online search. That's why it's important to go about the process in an orderly fashion. This chapter will show you the steps you need to take.

Whenever you write—as a student in a composition classroom or a professional in a workplace—you focus on a specific topic. Sometimes you may be provided with a general theme or a specific topic or issue. For example, your instructor might ask you to respond to an essay you've read for class, or your manager at work might ask you to share your plans to improve business or increase sales in the next quarter. Other times, most often in the course of college work, you get to start from scratch and choose a topic purely out of your own interest and curiosity.

So how do you choose a topic? Where should you start? One place might be this book. The Index of Themes (p. T-1) organizes every reading in this text by topic, and the Index of Genres (p. G-1) will help you see the relationship between topic choice and genre choice.

### 1. Brainstorm Topic Ideas | What Are You Curious About?

The best way to get started on identifying a topic that is meaningful to you is to get your ideas flowing. Whether you're composing from your own experience or composing based on research, you can use the same prewriting techniques that we discussed in Chapter 4: talk to people, make a brainstorm list, make a mind map, and freewrite.

In addition to those strategies, find out what others have already said about the topic and discuss those ideas with others.

**Do some preliminary reading online, but be disciplined about it.** Google a few things you are interested in to find some potential topics to research. You can find out what's in the news or what others are talking about by going to news sources, like *The New York Times* or CNN, and opinion sources, like *Salon* and *Slate*. If you want to skim scholarly sources, try Google Scholar ([scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com)). If you go to Wikipedia, be sure to look at the source links for the entries you read. That's where you'll find the best leads. And don't be all day about it: Remember, you're generating ideas, not surfing mindlessly. To come up with a healthy list of topic ideas, try answering the following questions. Keep in mind any topic restrictions built into your assignment.

**Activity: Generating Ideas for Topics**

1. Ideas come out of conversations. What comes up in your talks with friends? What was the topic of your last discussion or disagreement? What are some of your unresolved questions about the topic?
2. Ideas come out of our passions. What are you passionate about?
3. Ideas come out of pet peeves. What bothers you on a regular basis? What would you change about your campus, town, state, country, or the world if you were in charge?
4. Ideas come out of our curiosities. What are you curious about?
5. Ideas come out of our concerns. What do you worry about?

## 2. Explore Topic Ideas Through Preliminary Research | Ask Yourself, Who's Saying What?

Once you've identified a topic area, you're ready to dig a little deeper to better understand it. Keep a few possibilities in mind and conduct preliminary research on several related topics (or subtopics) so you can make an informed decision about which one to commit to; the viability of each topic will depend on what you find out at this point. As with the preliminary reading you did during brainstorming, you'll continue to draw on sources written for nonexperts. Later in your process, you'll move on to more specialized sources using scholarly databases. As you conduct preliminary research, focus on the following:

**Words and facts.** Ask yourself some questions. Are there terms you need to define? And what are the facts?

**Opinions.** Find out what others have to say on the subject, and notice what evidence they use to support their opinions. In addition to facts, what opinions surround your

topic? Who writes about the topic, and why are they concerned? On what sources do they base their statements or arguments? What sources do they draw on? And what sources might you want to use, too?

**Your perspective.** Form your own arguments in response to others. As you research, you will begin to form your own ideas and opinions about your topic.

**Conflicting views.** Notice who disagrees about your topic. When you begin reading sources related to your topic, you might begin to notice that there are viewpoints that stand opposed to each other. Furthermore, as you dig into these disagreements, you might realize that the differing viewpoints are well researched and should not be immediately dismissed. Discovering well-researched, well-reasoned opposing stances related to your topic forces you to accept that there is not necessarily one “correct” viewpoint; reasonable people can disagree.

**The irrational.** Avoid arguments that are just too “out there.” In the course of your research, you may stumble upon the ideas of people who are unreasonable, ill informed, or both. Keep a critical eye as you read sources.

**Key terms.** As you conduct preliminary research, you’ll notice that certain terms pop up. Follow up on these key terms by using them in your searches of the Internet and library databases.

Following is an assignment we give our students during their preliminary research phase. It includes the responses of a student, Jasmine Huerta, whose research topic is diabetes. (Note: We will see more of her work on this project later in the chapter.)

Through answering the assigned questions, Jasmine realizes that she has several interesting potential research questions to pursue. The list of key terms helped her continue and refine her research. She realized that the glycemic index is not 100 percent accepted, which surprised and intrigued her. By using the Internet to find key terms, exploring some of these potential subtopics, previewing and reading sources, and then reflecting on her process and discoveries, Jasmine narrows her topic from diabetes to the role of nutrition in the diabetic patient.

### ASSIGNMENT **Jasmine Huerta** (STUDENT), *What Is Your Topic?*

English 101  
Professor Braziller

September 26, 2017

Respond to the following questions to see how workable your topic may be.

1. What is the general topic area you are considering?

I am interested in researching and writing about diabetes.

(Continues on next page)



#### ▲ STUDENT AUTHOR

**Jasmine Huerta.**

*In this chapter, we follow this student as she chooses and investigates a topic (diabetes). Jasmine appears next on page 300.*

*Credit: Claudelle Girard/ iStock/Getty Images*

◀ To the left, in blue type, are Jasmine’s very early ideas about her diabetes project and some information on what she’s discovered during preliminary research.

2. Why? Are you truly fascinated/curious/passionate about the topic? How did you become interested in this topic? (If your answer is no, explain why and then move on to the next topic without answering any more questions.)

Diabetes runs in my family, so it's something I want to understand more about in case I am faced with it at some point. My six-year-old cousin has type 1 diabetes. My mother had gestational diabetes when she was pregnant with me. Most recently, my grandfather, who is a bit overweight (as is my cousin), was diagnosed with diabetes. I'm wondering if I am just destined to develop it at some point because of my family history. I also wonder if perhaps there are things I can do to prevent the disease, since I presently don't have diabetes. I worry about both my cousin and grandfather, so I'd like to see if there are some things they could do to keep their diabetes under control, rather than just relying on traditional medicine.

3. What surprising facts have you gathered so far about your topic? What further questions do you have that you need answered with data?

Surprising facts/data:

- According to Wikipedia's entry "Diabetes" (accessed on 9/20/17): "Diabetic patients with neuropathic symptoms such as numbness or tingling in feet or hands are twice as likely to be unemployed as those without the symptoms."
- A link found on the American Diabetes Association to an article on SmartBrief.com stated that those who are exposed to secondhand smoke have a greater risk of contracting diabetes.
- According to an article about lifestyle and home remedies, found on the Mayo Clinic's page, diabetes can contribute to gum infections.

4. Do reasonable people disagree about the topic? If so, what aspects of the topic do they disagree about? Who disagrees with whom? Name names.

There seems to be a bit of a debate about what makes the best approach for a diabetic diet. While surfing around on the Internet, one of the big debates I found discussed the glycemic index and how it relates to managing diabetes. It seems that people used to think you just had to avoid high-sugar foods, but after reading a few articles, I realized that many researchers want to look more

closely at using the glycemic index (taking into account carbohydrates) in working with diabetic diets.

In an article titled "Low-Glycemic Index Diets in the Management of Diabetes," Miller et al. argue that this is a positive approach. I found an editorial written by Marion Franz in the publication *Diabetes Care* that argues with this approach: "The Glycemic Index: Not the most effective nutrition therapy intervention." In the Mayo Clinic's advice column, "Ask a Diabetes Specialist," someone wrote to Dr. Maria Collazo-Clavel, asking, "Is the glycemic-index diet useful for people with diabetes?" She responds that it's very complicated to use this as a measure, cautioning that it might not be the best approach for everybody.

**5. Is the topic researchable in the time you have?**

I don't see any issues with researching the topic this semester. In a short amount of time I was able to find many sources and potential ideas. I have a number of family members who deal with diabetes. I can easily interview them. I also would like to contact a doctor who treats people with diabetes and arrange an interview, perhaps by phone or e-mail.

**6. What are some subtopics that have emerged in your research?**

Nutrition to manage diabetes, medication to manage diabetes, alternative treatments for diabetes, prevention of diabetes, social issues connected to diabetes.

**7. What questions might you pursue in further research, based on what you've discovered during preliminary research?**

- What types of diets are best for people with diabetes?
- How can diet prevent someone from getting diabetes if he or she has a family history of diabetes?
- How can following certain nutritional guidelines make diabetes go away?
- How can alternative treatments or natural medications be used instead of insulin?
- What countries have the highest rate of diabetes? What contributes to the high rate?

**8. What are some key terms that keep coming up in relation to this topic?**

Glycemic index, metabolism, blood sugar, hypertension, obesity, glucose monitoring, insulin.

### 3. Commit to a Single Topic | What Are You Most Curious About?

Once you've identified a general topic area, it's time to commit to one specific topic within it. The "What Is Your Topic?" assignment (p. 295) can assist you with this choice, as can the following questions:

**Is your topic compatible with your assignment? And can you make a strong argument about it?** If your instructor has given you an assignment, read it carefully and consider the degree to which your topic will work. If you've been asked to make an argument, you might find yourself gravitating toward controversial issues—such as gun control, abortion, and censorship. However, we urge you to consider other, less obvious topics. For example, if you are interested in the subject of gun control, rather than choosing the topic of concealed weapons and constitutional rights, you might take the topic of gun control and examine the power that gun control groups, such as the NRA, hold in the political arena.

**Do you like your topic enough to stick with it?** If you are not truly curious about your topic, you probably won't remain interested in your research beyond the first week or so. Choose something you really want to learn about, that has some connection to you and your life.

**What is your deadline, and how will it affect your plans for research?** If your completed project is due in two weeks, choose a topic for which there is plenty of information that you can access easily. If you have more time, say an entire fifteen-week semester, you have the luxury of using a range of sources, and conducting interviews or surveys, for example, so you can select your topic accordingly. On the other hand, if your topic is so obscure that your only sources need to be ordered through interlibrary loan (which can take several weeks), it is not a good topic for either a two-week or fifteen-week deadline.

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#### ATTENTION, RESEARCHERS

**Looking for something to argue about? Almost any topic offers argumentative angles: The key is to find the angles.**

For example, while "reading" may not seem like the most provocative topic, a quick Google search reveals that it's the subject of much debate. Some questions around this debate include: Do college students read more or less than in the past? Is online reading cognitively different from reading books? What is the relationship between how much we read and our development of critical thinking skills?

The point is to keep an open mind to topics that seem vanilla. You may find some spice under the surface.

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**Will you find appropriate sources for your topic?** Some topics are so current that there is little or no published research available. For example, a friend who works in the field of bioengineering might tell you that scientists are developing crops with deeper roots to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, but because the research has just begun, there are no published articles about it. In this case, you might want to shift your topic toward an aspect of bioengineering that is more researchable in the present.

## 4. Form a Working Research Question | Refine as You Go

**What's your general topic? What questions will move you from a basic, broad idea to more specific ideas?** Creating research questions focuses your attention from a general topic to a specific aspect of the topic, as follows:

GENERAL TOPIC	Diabetes
WORKING RESEARCH QUESTIONS	What causes diabetes? What is the latest medical research on diabetes? How can people avoid getting diabetes?

While you'll ask (and answer) lots of questions in your research, your "research question" is the big question, the one that you are ultimately interested in answering.

But as you discover more about your topic, you might revise your question to reflect what you're learning, as follows:

REVISED RESEARCH QUESTION	What is the relationship between nutrition and diabetes?
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**What questions—focused on finding facts and defining terms—can move you toward a final research question?** As you begin your research, many of your questions will be focused on gathering facts and defining terms. If, as in the example above, you're researching the general topic of diabetes, you will ask questions at the outset such as the following:

BASIC FACT-FINDING QUESTIONS	What causes diabetes? Who is affected by it, and why? What alternative treatments are there (as opposed to insulin)? What is the role of glucose and the glycemic index?
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### WRITE

What is the general topic of your research? What are your questions about it so far?

Which questions have to do with finding facts? Which ones are more about analysis? What, in your early research, has surprised you most?



Your research question, however, should focus on more complex analysis. Following are some examples of revised, more final research questions:

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How can changes in diet help a person manage diabetes?  
How can managing sugar and sodium intake help someone avoid taking insulin?  
Why does the traditional medical establishment not promote alternatives to insulin injections?

Notice how these questions require extensive research and even speculation, especially the last question. These would make solid research questions, while the first set of questions would not, although they would be useful questions to ask in the course of researching one of the questions in the second list.

## CHECKLIST | Refining Your Research Question

What are the qualities of a really good research question? As you refine yours, ask yourself:

- Is it appropriate for your rhetorical situation or assignment?**
- Is it open-ended**, meaning it cannot be answered with a simple yes, no, or maybe, or a single number?
- Are the terms of the question specific enough or too general?**
- Can it be answered in the time you have—and with the resources you have access to?** You might have a fascinating and specific research question, but if you can't feasibly research it in the time you have, it just won't work.
- Is it a question that you really want to find answers to?** The best research grows out of curiosity. No matter how good your research question is, if it isn't backed up by your genuine interest, it won't lead you to rich, interesting research.

## Moving from a Research Question to a Proposal

Now that you've got an understanding of how to explore a topic and form working research questions, let's look at some next steps.

While you may not follow every step that Jasmine takes as you work on your own research topic, tracing her process (through p. 309) may give you ideas for how to proceed.

Ultimately, Jasmine moved from a research question to the argument she made in her final paper, which also became her title:

#### FINAL RESEARCH QUESTION

How can diet help someone with diabetes manage the disease and avoid taking insulin?

## Finding Facts About Diabetes

What was Jasmine's process? First, through her early reading, and as a person with a family history of the disease, Jasmine realizes that what interests her most are the dietary concerns of diabetics. With this in mind, she begins to explore a few more sources.

Wikipedia is her starting point. Even though her instructor has cautioned the class against using Wikipedia as a source (see our advice about Wikipedia on p. 294), Jasmine sees it as a good starting point for general information, and perhaps some leads related to the dietary concerns of diabetics. She begins with the "Diabetes mellitus" page (when she typed in "Diabetes," she was redirected there).


After reading through the overview, Jasmine realizes that she needs information about the differences between type 1 diabetes and type 2 diabetes (which the entry explains is the more common form, and the one that can be treated through diet). She discovers she'll also need to explore diabetes in terms of blood glucose levels, metabolism, body weight, and insulin.

Of particular interest is the "References" section of the "Diabetes mellitus" page, which offers Jasmine a head start on exploring other sources.

### ▼ WIKIPEDIA ENTRY

"Diabetes mellitus." Jasmine reads through this entry with special attention to the "References" section for further resources for information on diet.

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## Diabetes mellitus

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

*"Diabetes" redirects here. For other uses, see Diabetes (disambiguation).*

Diabetes mellitus, or simply **diabetes**, is a group of metabolic diseases in which a person has high blood sugar, either because the pancreas does not produce enough insulin, or because cells do not respond to the insulin that is produced.<sup>[2]</sup> This high blood sugar produces the classical symptoms of polyuria (frequent urination), polydipsia (increased thirst) and polyphagia (increased hunger).

There are three main types of diabetes mellitus (DM).


- Type 1 DM results from the body's failure to produce insulin, and currently requires the person to inject insulin or wear an insulin pump. This form was previously referred to as "insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus" (IDDM) or "juvenile diabetes".
- Type 2 DM results from insulin resistance, a condition in which cells fail to use insulin properly, sometimes combined with an absolute insulin deficiency. This form was previously referred to as non insulin-dependent diabetes mellitus (NIDDM) or "adult-onset diabetes".
- The third main form, gestational diabetes occurs when pregnant women without a previous diagnosis of diabetes develop a high blood glucose level. It may precede development of type 2 DM.

Other forms of diabetes mellitus include congenital diabetes, which is due to genetic defects of insulin secretion, cystic fibrosis-related diabetes, steroid diabetes induced by high doses of glucocorticoids, and several forms of monogenic diabetes.

Untreated, diabetes can cause many complications. Acute complications include diabetic ketoacidosis and nonketotic hyperosmolar coma. Serious long-term complications include cardiovascular disease, chronic renal failure, and diabetic retinopathy (retinal damage). Adequate treatment of diabetes is thus important, as well as blood pressure control and lifestyle factors such as stopping smoking and maintaining a healthy body weight.

### Diabetes mellitus

*Classification and external resources*



Universal blue circle symbol for diabetes.<sup>[1]</sup>

ICD-10	E10–E14
ICD-9	250
MedlinePlus	001214
eMedicine	med.548  emerg/134
MeSH	C18.452.394.750

► WIKIPEDIA REFERENCE DETAIL

The "References" section provides Jasmine with authoritative resources.

Credit: Courtesy of Wikimedia Foundation. Inc. All rights reserved.

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Jasmine looks closely at the "External links" section of Wikipedia and decides to investigate the American Diabetes Association (ADA). She finds out that the ADA is a nonprofit group whose purpose is to control diabetes, especially through improving healthcare access and funding research and prevention.

As Jasmine explores the ADA's page, she notices a "Food & Fitness section" that she's especially drawn to because of her interest in nutrition.

In the "Food & Fitness" section, Jasmine is surprised by the emphasis on recipes and meal planning as ways to control the disease. She finds the following information especially interesting:

- Beans, berries, and tomatoes are diabetes "superfoods."
- We shouldn't just look at the sugar content on food labels. It's more useful to examine the total carbohydrate number.
- Recipes for diabetics are not dull. The site includes recipes for Texas Tuna Burger, Asian Roast Pork Sliders, and Whole Wheat Pancakes.

As Jasmine continues to read through the ADA site, she gets more absorbed in the idea that eating specific kinds of foods can assist in managing diabetes. She decides her next step is to find more information on nutrition, maybe even some more recipes designed for diabetics. A hospital or research facility might be another good source, she thinks, and she decides to check out the Mayo Clinic site.

There she finds information on diabetes, along with meal plans and recipes. She gets even more interested in the relationship between diet and diabetes management.

Jasmine notices a recipe for Blackberry Iced Tea. The recipe itself, and the surrounding information, presents Jasmine with a few things to think about. First, the "Dietitian's tip" mentions that most herbal teas are caffeine-free, which makes her wonder about the connection between caffeine and the health of a diabetic. She also notices the use of cinnamon and ginger and wonders how these natural ingredients might benefit a diabetic. In the nutritional analysis of the recipe, Jasmine sees that the drink is low in calories and does not contain any sodium. She wonders if these are important concerns; before she started browsing recipes at the ADA and the Mayo Clinic, Jasmine knew that diabetics should avoid sugar, but she hadn't been taking sodium and calorie content into consideration.

Now that Jasmine has done some exploratory, informational reading, she's ready to see what scholars have to say about managing diabetes through diet. She moves on to look for sources that will offer viewpoints and arguments about diabetes and nutrition.

The screenshot shows the Mayo Clinic website interface. At the top, there are navigation links for 'Patient Care', 'Health Information', 'For Medical Professionals', 'Research', and 'Education'. Below this is a search bar and a navigation menu with categories like 'Diseases and Conditions', 'Symptoms', 'Drugs and Supplements', 'Tests and Procedures', 'Healthy Lifestyle', and 'Find AID'. The main content area is titled 'Diabetes' and features a sidebar with a list of topics: 'Basics', 'In-Depth', 'Multimedia', 'Expert Answers', 'Expert Blog', 'Resources', and 'What's New'. The 'Definition' section is circled in red. The definition text states: 'Diabetes mellitus refers to a group of diseases that affect how your body uses blood glucose, commonly called blood sugar. Glucose is vital to your health because it's an important source of energy for the cells that make up you: muscles and tissues. It's also your brain's main source of fuel.' Below this, there is a section titled 'Controlling Your Diabetes' with a 'Sign up now' button.

#### ◀ WEB SITE

**Mayo Clinic.** On their "Diabetes" page, the Mayo Clinic provides a definition of the disease. Jasmine is interested to see how this information compares to that of the ADA.

*Credit:* Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research

## Gathering Opinions about Diabetes

Jasmine looks for other sources—including a journal article, a Web site, and a YouTube video—to provide current viewpoints on nutrition as prevention/treatment for diabetes.

### 1. *Progress in Lipid Research* article

When Jasmine looks at the references on the Wikipedia entry, she finds a peer-reviewed journal article entitled “Dietary Fats and Prevention of Type 2 Diabetes.” When she goes to the article, she finds in the introduction this statement:

Dietary composition could play a significant role in improving insulin sensitivity and reducing risk of diabetes and its composition. Risérus, Ulf, Walter C. Willett, and Frank B. Hu. “Dietary Fats and Prevention of Type 2 Diabetes.”

*Progress in Lipid Research*, vol. 48, issue 1, 2009, pp. 44–51.

### 2. The Joslin Diabetes Center

At this site, Jasmine reads the views of Amy Campbell, a Joslin nutritionist and the coauthor of a book titled *16 Myths of a Diabetic Diet*. Campbell states that there is no such thing as a “diabetic diet.” Jasmine finds the following quote from Campbell on a Joslin page titled “The Truth about the So-Called ‘Diabetes Diet’”:

A person with diabetes can eat anything a person without diabetes eats.

Amy Campbell, from “The Truth about the So-Called ‘Diabetes Diet’”

### 3. “Introduction to Clinical Nutrition and Diabetes” Video

On YouTube, Jasmine finds a video produced by USF Health (University of South Florida College of Public Health). In it, USF medical student Candace Haddox explains some of the connections between nutrition and diabetes management. In the video, “Introduction to Clinical Nutrition and Diabetes,” Haddox suggests:

You don’t have to go straight to medication. There is something that you can do and it actually happens to be the most effective and that is a lifestyle modification: a little bit of weight loss, you know, fixing up the diet. . . .

## CHECKLIST | Narrowing a Topic

As you start your research, consider following these steps:

- Brainstorm topic ideas.**
  - Read what others have said.
  - Google your topic (but stay focused).
  - Discuss what you find with others.
- Start writing informally.**
  - Make a list of topics that interest you, then double it, then double it again.
  - Freewrite about your topic.
  - Sketch out a mind map.
- Do preliminary research.**
  - Ask questions of fact and definition so that you will understand the more complex research you do later.
  - What arguments have others made about your topic? How do they support their views?
  - Note key terms to aid in later research.
- Commit to a topic. Consider these factors:**
  - Is the topic compatible with the assignment?
  - Have you found an argumentative angle?
  - Will you stay interested in this topic?
  - Are there enough appropriate sources available for you to research in the time you have?
- Form a research question. Consider these factors:**
  - Does your question focus more on stating facts and defining terms? Or are you making an argument? Providing an analysis?
  - Is your question open-ended?
  - Is your question specific enough? If not, how will you move from a general question to a more specific one?
  - Are you truly interested in finding answers to this question?
  - What are some challenges you may come up against as you research this question, and how can you deal with these challenges?

Now that she's gathered some facts and arguments about diabetes, Jasmine decides to meet with her instructor to talk about a final research question and plan her research proposal.

## Creating a Research Proposal

A research proposal sets forth a writer's rationale for choosing a particular research question. For Jasmine, the proposal gives her an opportunity to fine-tune her research question and her focus. Your instructor may ask you to turn in a proposal or a working bibliography that outlines your sources (pp. 310–312). Or your instructor might simply ask you to think about your research before looking more carefully at sources.

Even if your instructor does not assign a formal research proposal, it can be a great tool for use in planning your project. Following is a research proposal assignment that we give our students.