

**I can't make progress toward
my dissertation because**

**I can't
figure out
my topic**

How to choose the perfect
dissertation topic

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After we pass our comprehensive exams, we are apt to breathe a huge sigh of relief. Whew. Glad that's over! But the hardest part of our doctoral journey could be just beginning. I'm talking about choosing the dissertation topic. If we haven't chosen our topic yet, we may find ourselves scrambling.

Some of us know exactly what we want to study. Others must ponder options. Some of us have no clue where to find a topic.

Wherever you are on the spectrum, you may find yourself having to rethink and revise your topic multiple times before you find a topic that will work (i.e., get approved by your institution and committee members).

In this guide, you will learn to

- Narrow the scope of your topic
- Apply a logical process to finding your topic using four simple questions

Note. This guide is written especially for dissertators enrolled in social science fields (e.g., business, education, psychology, sociology, and so on).

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Introduction

We complete many challenging milestones when we enroll in a doctoral program. For most of us, the biggest challenge comes at the end: the dissertation. We can't achieve our dream of earning a Ph.D. or doctoral degree unless we successfully conduct a research project and write about it. This is our dissertation research; the manuscript is our dissertation. For most doctoral degrees, some kind of capstone project and paper is required.

Every school and program has different requirements. Some are strict; some are relaxed. Some have rigorous rules, down to indents, font size, and use of the word "I." Others allow just about any approach, any format, any writing style.

Find out the requirements of your school and program early, preferably before you enroll in the school, but certainly, soon after enrolling. This is important for planning a logical strategy to choose your dissertation topic.

The sooner you can identify your topic, the more targeted your course work will be—all your research and writing will be focused on a particular topic. The benefits are incalculable. You will

- become familiar with current and seminal literature on the topic;
- learn the debates and tensions in the field; and
- study the theoretical frameworks that scholars apply.

Thus, when the time comes to write your dissertation proposal, much of your preparatory work will be in place.

Read on for some guidance on choosing the dissertation topic that is right for you.

First, let's talk about scope

You've seen the word *scope*. Have you wondered what it means for you as a dissertator?

Scope is the definition of the edges of our study. How big are we going to go? We *could* study the *whole world*. Hey, why stop there? We could study the entire universe! That would be a very broad scope for a social scientist.

For your sake, I don't recommend biting off that much topic. In fact, I suggest narrowing the scope of your project—a lot.

Scope is what we have after we've set our *delimitations*. What are delimitations? Delimitations are restrictions we purposely implement to reduce the breadth and width—the scope—of our study. For example, we might delimit our study to one local geographical area or to one subset of a population.

My story

When I set about studying academic quality in for-profit vocational programs, I planned to talk to students, faculty, administrators, and employers. After some iterations (and replacements of committee members), I settled on a phenomenological approach to exploring academic quality through the perspectives of these four groups. How fun, I thought!

"Not so fast," said my new Chair. "Do you realize what a monumental data analysis task you are creating for yourself?"



"I can do it," I stubbornly replied, wondering to myself, *can* I do it?

I was enthusiastic until I started writing up my research plan. As I forged through Chapter 3 of my dissertation proposal, I began to see what I nightmare I was in for with four groups to compare. I was running out of time in my program. How would I be able to synthesize the results of qualitative interviews from four groups of stakeholders in less than six months?



When I hesitantly suggested we cut out employers, my Chair said, "Why not just study faculty? As long as you can explain why they alone are being studied, one group is sufficient for a doctoral project." Hallelujah. I made the decision to cut

back to just one group, faculty. That moment things began to fall into place.

I narrowed the scope of my study even further, like this:

1. I delimited my study to only for-profit faculty. I could have interviewed faculty who taught at private nonprofit and public institutions, in addition to faculty who taught at for-profit institutions. That would have been a different study.
2. I delimited my study to only one metropolitan region. I could have tried to find faculty in different cities. I didn't have the resources to do that.
3. I delimited my study to one qualitative approach with one small sample of faculty. I could have done a mixed-methods survey to expose the definitions of academic quality generated by my small qualitative sample to a larger quantitative sample. That project was too big for me, and more to the point, not necessary.

If you think about it, our problem and research questions are actually delimitations, and those delimitations define the scope of our study. We identify the boundaries we've placed on our research in terms of who we are studying (our sample) and how we are studying them (our methodology and method).

Your reviewers will likely ask you to justify your delimitations. Why did you choose that place, those people, rather than other places and other people? Be ready to explain your choices.

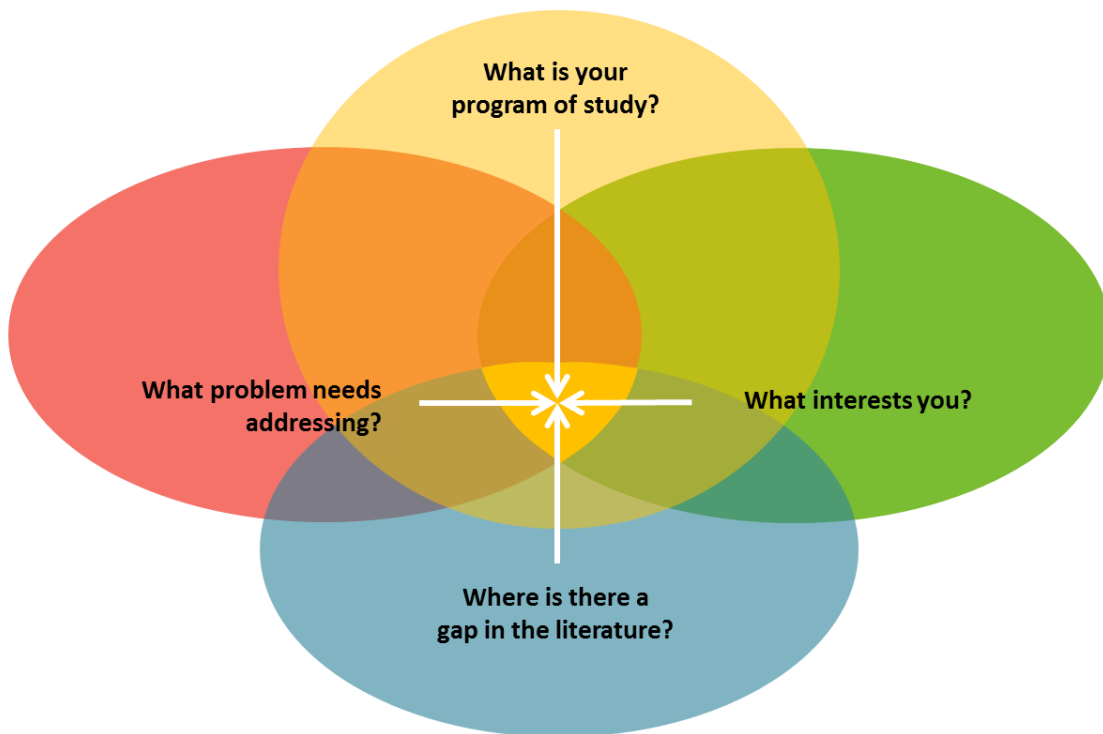
Too broad a scope is a problem I often see in the papers I edit. This happens in both proposals and manuscripts. In manuscripts, we fall prey to "scope creep," as our writing starts to stray from the topic. It's tempting to try to get our arms around all facets of a problem, especially after we've collected our data and are writing up the results.

If you didn't limit the scope in your proposal, and somehow that got by your reviewers, you can still attempt to manage the scope when you write your manuscript by defining your terms and describing your study's limitations with strict clarity.

I recommend, when you describe the topic for a doctoral dissertation, keep the focus and scope tight and narrow. Later you can study other groups in other places using other methods.

Now that we've reviewed the big picture of scope, let's talk about the four questions that will help you narrow your topic to the one that makes sense for you.

The Dissertation Topic Decision Flower



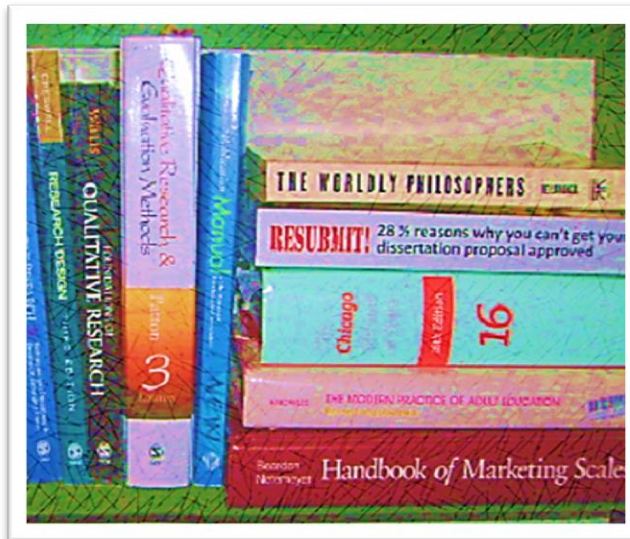
Here are four questions to help you choose your dissertation topic.

- What interests you?
- What is your program of study?
- What problem needs addressing?
- Where is there a gap in the literature?

Your best topic emerges at the intersection of these four questions.

1. What interests you?

Let's start with you. By this point in your doctoral journey, I'm sure you have read many books, articles, and opinions written by experts in your field. Within your program of study, what have you



read or learned so far that interests you, even marginally?

As you read, I encourage you to make a list of authors, debates, opinions, problems, and issues. Anything that grabs your attention and piques your curiosity, write it down.

Keep a list. Go back through the articles and books you have used in your courses. Skim the tables of contents and headings. Look at diagrams. Ask yourself, "What more would I like to know about this issue?" Jot down questions. Notice tensions.

Brainstorm

Using the worksheet on the next page, organize the issues and topics that interest you into three categories: Passionately Interesting, Moderately Interesting, and Mildly Interesting. Do not include any items that are not interesting to you.

Three lists: Passionately Interesting, Moderately Interesting, and Mildly Interesting

Passionately interesting	Moderately interesting	Mildly interesting

Now you have three lists of ideas that you could evaluate further. Most likely, there are some overlaps among ideas. Highlight the items that seem unique.

Beware your passion

Many doctoral students know what they want to study from the moment they enroll in graduate school. They have a passion to study a problem. Passion can be good. However, are you feeling righteous indignation? That could be a red flag that you are making your topic choice more difficult.

Why? When we are immersed in our passionate quest, we aren't thinking like scholars. We are thinking like outraged citizens or concerned parents or vociferous workers. That is a clear sign we have lost our objectivity.

I have edited many papers written by dissertators who let their passion and righteous indignation—well, anger—erupt onto the pages of their proposals and manuscripts. In most cases, I recommend they rein it back a bit.

As scholars, we aim to produce the most valid, robust study we can. This means we avoid injecting our personal biases into our research. This is not easy, especially for qualitative researchers. Nevertheless, we have to try if we want to have any credibility in our research.

Next, let's define the parameters of your program.

2. What is your program of study?

Maybe you are thinking, *hey, my program of study will obviously narrow the scope of my topic*. You are correct, it will, but beware of the possibility that your major and your passion are not aligned closely enough.

It may seem obvious to you that your program is your first parameter, but it almost presented a problem for me.

I wanted to understand academic quality in for-profit vocational colleges. This could have been considered a topic best suited to an education major. However, I was enrolled in the School of Business. I had to make it explicitly clear that I was interested in the problem of academic quality from the point of view of a marketing manager, not necessarily an educator, although much of what I learned applied to educators (and administrators) as well as marketers.

Here's another example. I edited a concept paper for a learner who wanted to study a topic related to her background in healthcare. Her passion was measuring the effectiveness of a certain medical test. However, she was a business major. Every time she submitted her paper, her mentor would ask, "What does this have to do with business?"

The learner struggled through several iterations of her concept, growing increasingly frustrated. We brainstormed possible topics that could encompass both her major and her passion. However, time was running out on her program. Eventually she abandoned her passion for a topic that aligned more closely with her business major.

Here are some examples of approaches you can adapt to combine your major with your passion.

Your major	Your passion	Methodology	Possible topics that combine both...
Social work	Multicultural pedagogy	Quantitative	How teachers' use of multicultural pedagogy affects math scores among foster children
		Qualitative	How school social workers perceive teachers' use of multicultural pedagogy
Business	Healthcare	Quantitative	How improving healthcare outcomes affects profitability among rural hospitals
		Qualitative	How healthcare patients perceive services provided by billing departments at rural hospitals
Education	Adaptive technology	Quantitative	How teachers' use of adaptive technology affects outcomes for special needs children
		Qualitative	How teachers' perceive the value of adaptive technology for special needs children
Marketing	Video games	Quantitative	How applying video game logic affects user experiences for online consumers
		Qualitative	How online consumers perceive gaming techniques used for ecommerce
Organizational leadership	Racial injustice	Quantitative	How managers' attitudes about race affect employee satisfaction and turnover at ABC Company
		Qualitative	How employees perceive managers' attitudes about race at ABC Company

Use this worksheet to brainstorm.

Your major _____

Passion 1. _____

Major + passion _____

Passion 2. _____

Major + passion _____

Passion 3. _____

Major + passion _____

3. What problem needs addressing?

Now we expand our exploration. It's not enough to just focus on what interests us. Many topics are interesting. However, are they worth studying? We must identify a problem that is worth studying. This could mean solving a problem or simply studying a problem so other people can solve the problem using what we've learned.

For example, I was already interested in the topic of academic quality in for-profit career colleges because I taught at a for-profit career college. I found support for my topic in the news: Academic quality in for-profit career colleges was being hotly debated after an undercover government investigation found many instances of deceptive marketing practices.

Within your program of study, what problems can you identify? Here are some actions to help hone in on viable problems to study:

1. Review your list of interests from the first question in this guide. Did you identify areas of debate? Did you come across any group that needs help? Did you find some injustice in the world that needs resolution?
2. Look through the titles of articles from several journals published in your field. You can glean a good idea of the problems that are getting attention.
3. Think, too, about the scope of a problem: Some problems only matter to a few people, some matter to the entire planet. What you want is something in between. If you want to study a planet-sized problem, you can; just do it through a human-sized approach.

A topic worth studying

There could conceivably be billions of ideas on your list of problems. However, not all problems are worth studying. I have a problem with my cat. When I am typing, he expresses annoyance by uttering a peculiarly grating cross between a meow and a growl at just the right frequency to burrow under my skin and make me want to scream. This is a problem, but only for me.

Could I expand this topic to explore the possibility that many writers have cats who interrupt with grating yowls. Would anyone care? I doubt any dissertation chair or committee would say this topic rises to the level of doctoral research.

Research-worthy problems are real, affect somebody, are happening now, and don't have any viable solutions (Ellis & Levy, 2008).

Think about how your study can help make the world a better place.

4. Where is there a gap in the literature?

The easiest way to locate a topic to study is to read the recommendations for further research made by authors of articles in your field. These authors discovered the “gaps” in the literature as they did their research. You can fill one or more of these gaps with your research. Many of those research recommendations are deep enough to provide a dissertation-worthy topic.

1. Go through a stack of articles (figuratively speaking, since your search will be online. You aren't wasting resources printing articles, right? Please tell me you aren't.).
2. Skim the articles and pay close attention to the authors' recommendations for future research, found near the end of most articles.
3. Make a list of gaps you find. These are potential topics for future researchers to tackle.

You may have searched high and low for articles on a particular topic and found little or nothing. However, just because there is little research on a topic does not mean the topic is worthy of doctoral-level study.

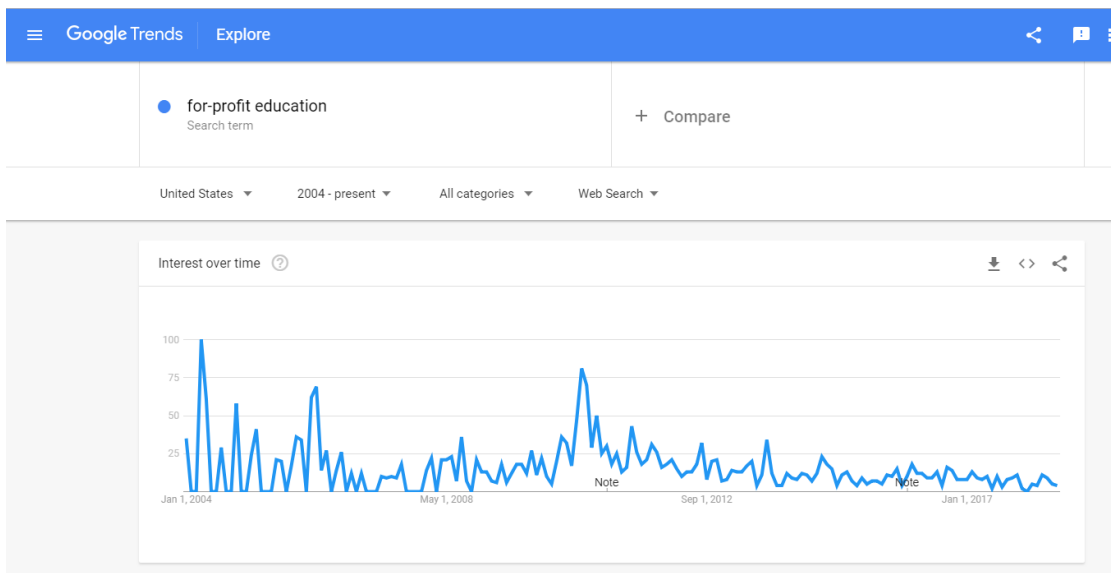
Just because there is little research on a topic does not mean the topic is worthy of doctoral-level study. Further, if you try to research a topic that is so cutting-edge that nothing has been published about it yet, you will find yourself too far ahead of the curve. For example, in the area of for-profit higher education,

there were many opinions, but not much peer-reviewed literature. In objective research, opinions don't count.

To find out if the problem is over- or under-studied, use a tool like Thomson Reuters' ISI Web of Science/Web of Knowledge, which should be available through your university library.

Use keywords to search various topics in online databases with search tools like ProQuest, EBSCOhost, SAGE, and the Taylor & Francis Group. After some searching, you will start to get a sense of what has been well studied and whether interest in a topic is growing or fading.

You can also use Google Trends to find out how a topic is trending in Google searches. Here's a Google Trends chart showing U.S. searches for "for-profit education" since 2004. Hot topic once, now not so much.



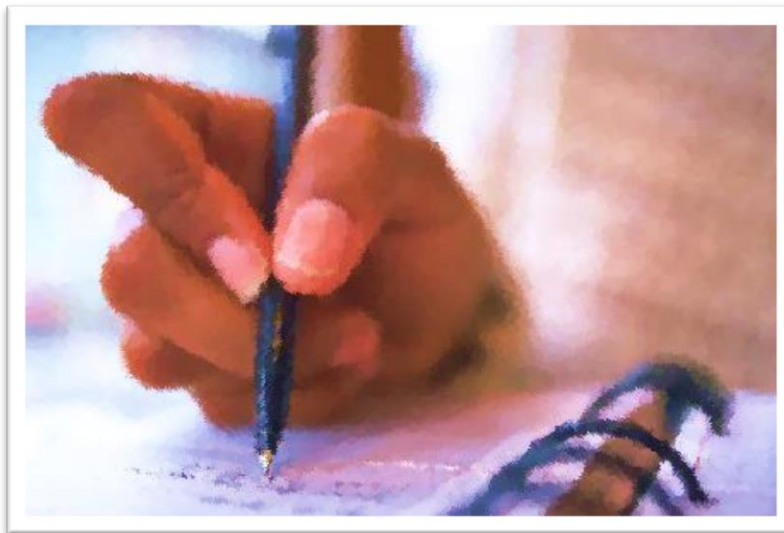
Keep in mind that even a well-studied topic can be explored through a fresh approach—for example, new locations, new target populations, and new methods.

Summary

Now let's put it all together.

Look for the ideas that appear on two or more of your lists. These should be topics that present interesting problems that are in your program and have not been overly studied. In other words, the intersection of the four questions. If you use this method as a guideline to choose a topic, you will be well positioned to prepare your first milestone document for your dissertation.

There are many potential dissertation topics. The more you read, the more you will be able to discern potential topics. Remember, you only need one. But it may take several iterations before you settle on the one that is most viable for you.



If this seems hard, you are not alone. Many people have trouble choosing a topic. They get caught up in thinking the choice of topic defines the rest of their lives. Not

so: This is only the beginning of your research career. Many dissertators shift gears to a related topic or delve into multiple topics after they finish their doctorates. The topic doesn't have to be "perfect." It just needs to be chosen so you can move on to the fun part: collecting data.

Strategic reflection

In school, what were your favorite courses?

Where do you see yourself in five years, 10 years?

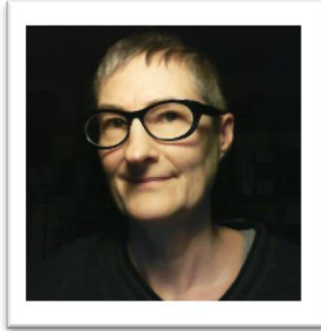
What topics will position you for the career you want?

Suggestions

- Make a list of problems that interest you.
- Identify your program of study.
- Identify problems that need addressing.
- Review existing research to locate a gap in the literature.
- Read Ellis and Levy's (2008) article.
- Check out Thomson Reuters Web of Science/Web of Knowledge (<http://wokinfo.com/>).
- Read Pojasek's (2005) article about methodologies and methods.
- Read articles in your field. Look at the end of each article for suggestions for future research.
- Talk to practitioners in your field. What problems do they face? Can you help?

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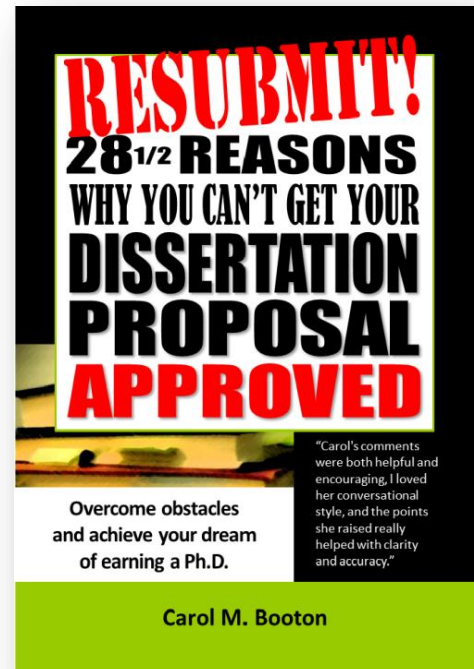
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Resources

Find more tips on many other obstacles that could hinder you from earning your Ph.D. in my book *Resubmit! 28 1/2 Reasons Why You Can't Get Your Dissertation Proposal Approved*, published by Crossline Press, available through Amazon in print and Kindle versions.

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