

Module I

Defining Your Topic

Objectives: learn how to define your topic, refine (expand or limit) it, select concepts and keywords and test your topic by searching in the Library catalog. These are the steps we suggest you take when defining your topic.

Assume that your topic is Autism.

Step 1. Finding a Definition: Use a dictionary or encyclopedia if you don't know what a term or subject means.

Autism – a form of childhood schizophrenia marked by acting out and withdrawal.
(Webster's II New Riverside University)

Step 2. Find out if your topic is viable by the number of hit the library catalog gives on the topic.

- a) If you got results from your search, you probably have a viable topic.
- b) If you did not get results, note whether the computer suggested other possibilities.
- c) If you did not get results, you will need to find synonyms for your topic.

Step 3. Write your research idea in the form of a question. A question forces you to think of two or more variables. This will help focus and limit the topic.

What are the effects of behavior modification on autistic children?

Our topic now becomes a treatment for autism within a specific age group

Step 4. Pick out the nouns in your question and list them as keywords. Be sure to include synonyms or variations of the terms.

Keywords: effect OR effects, behavior modification, autistic OR autism, child OR children

These are terms you will use to start your search. Over the course of your project, you may change and test numerous terms and keywords. Keep track of the terms you use. You don't want to spend unnecessary time redoing searches because you 'forgot' what terms you already used.

There are of course other ways to limit your search and they include dates, format of material, age groups, and primary or secondary sources. The experienced researcher might use any or all of these limiters.

MODULE 1 EXERCISE

Follow the four steps listed on the previous page to focus your topic. Fill in the blanks.

List your choice of topic from the front of the workbook: _____

Step 1. Use a dictionary to give a definition of the topic:

Dictionary Title: _____

Step 2. Let's see whether your topic is viable. Type the term into the Library Catalog.

a) Do you get any results from your search? Yes ____ (Go to question b)

No ____ (Go to question c)

b) How many items/hits does the catalog have on this topic?

c) What other synonyms might you use? List at least one.

Step 3. Using two or more concepts, put your topic into the form of a question. Write it below.

Question: _____?

Step 4. Select search terms. Pick out the concepts/nouns and list them. These are your keywords. Write them below. Be sure to include synonyms or variations of the terms.

1. _____

2. _____