

From Broad Topics to Workable Study Questions

The Idea

When we talk casually about research, we tend to use short phrases or even single words to designate our study projects. “Renaissance literature,” is what I say about my study and teaching interests if I can tell that only a polite answer is needed. Nobody on a Delta flight to San Antonio needs to hear about my real topic, say, the extent to which the works of William Tyndale affected the treatment of early modern English vocabulary by the Oxford English Dictionary.

What is good manners on an airplane can be a disaster in the library, however. You have to be able to define for yourself and your eventual readers what it is exactly that you’re trying to find out through your study. To do that, you have to move from broad topics (that you can summarize in 2-6 words) to workable study questions.

Two Illustrations

	Example A	Example B
Interest Area	Texas history	Soccer
Broad Topic	Movies about the Alamo	Recent World Cup competitions
Narrow Topic	The development of cinematic treatments of the Alamo	Conflicts between club loyalty and national loyalty in recent World Cup competitions
Study Question	How have the political implications of Hollywood movies about the Alamo changed over time?	What effects has the internationalization of club soccer had on fan loyalties in recent World Cup competitions?

The next page will apply this same general idea to two areas of study about Milton. Before you turn the page, try to envision how you would fill out the table above if the “interest area” slots had been filled by phrases like “Milton and Shakespeare” or “Milton’s theological ideas.”

OK, now turn the page.

Helpful Questions

One way to move from an interest area or broad topic to workable study problem is to force yourself to ask questions. There are three special kinds of questions that, ever since Aristotle, have guided the art of “coming up with something to say” or *invention*:

- Parts and Wholes
- History and Changes
- Categories and Characteristics

Here is another table that shows you how these questions might “flush out” workable leads for a study project.

	Milton and Shakespeare	Milton’s theological ideas
Parts and Wholes	What are the parts of Milton’s use of Shakespeare? How do his different uses of Shakespeare relate to one another? What parts of Shakespeare appealed to Milton? How does Milton’s use of Shakespeare form a part of how others have used Shakespeare?	What are the parts of Milton’s theological thinking? How do the different parts relate to one another and to Milton’s thinking about other subjects? How do Milton’s theological ideas form a part of a larger pattern of theological thought?
History and Changes	How did Milton’s use of Shakespeare change over time? Did his motives for using Shakespeare change? How did Milton learn to read Shakespeare, and who learned from him how to read Shakespeare? What was happening to Shakespeare’s reputation in Milton’s lifetime?	How did Milton’s theological ideas develop over time? Did different ideas develop differently? How do Milton’s theological ideas fit into a historical sequence? What forces caused Milton to change some of his theological ideas?
Categories and Characteristics	What is Milton’s most typical use of Shakespeare? How do his uses of Shakespeare in other works differ from it? What other uses of texts in Milton are most like his uses of Shakespeare?	What is Milton’s central theological idea? How does his “poetic” theology differ from his “prose” theology? Which theological ideas would have seemed most typical to his first readers?