

Five common mistakes research students make and what to do about it...

1. **Choosing the wrong topic** – From the feedback I get from students, this seems to be one of the most critical aspects to get right! Think carefully when you choose the topic you are going to research... remember that you are going to be married to it for the entire journey of your research. The topic needs to be something that you are really interested in and that you will be able to “stomach” for anywhere between 6 to 18 months! The topic you choose in the end also needs to be “researchable”!

What to do about it: A really good place to start is to think about the following for inspiration:

- Your own passions and specific areas of interest;
- A topic that really peaked your interest during your study journey;
- A topic that is currently actively discussed and that could be of value to you where you work
- Other areas of interest that you have that you want to learn more about

Choose a creative process that you like and are familiar with, generate a list of possible topics and get to a manageable number of topics (5 or 6). Do an initial “quick scan” of the literature on each of the topics on the list. Figure out whether there is *enough written about each topic* to give you a base to work from. If you choose a topic about which there is very limited research available, you will have to accept that you are going to be one of the pioneers in the space – this is a much more challenging journey to follow but I have seen some really successful pieces of research on topics like this. Just understand the challenges before you even start. Once you have “filtered” your initial list based on your “quick scan” literature research results, use a process of *ranking and rating* to get to your top two or three (max) possible topics that you will eventually choose from. For the ranking and rating process, create a simple matrix in excel where you type your possible topics as column headings, and you type the variables you will use to compare them in the rows. Something like this:

VARIABLES to consider (Score from 1 to 5; 1=low, 5=high)	Topic 1:	Topic 2:	Topic 3:	Topic 4:
Is it reasearchable? (Is there enough literature on the topic; Will I be able to get to the answers of typical objectives; etc.)				
Is it current, relevant and interesting?				
Am I passionate about it?				
Will it lead to practical solutions that I and others can use?				
Can I complet it in the time allowed?				
Do I have the budget and access to any specific equipment I may need to do it?				
ADD VARIABLES THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO YOU				
TOTAL SCORE:				

The last step in this process is where you need to *contextualise and refine the shortlisted topics* with the help of initial thoughts on a *problem statement or title* for your research. *Weigh the last two or three options* based on all the variables above and *make a choice!* Use the “Total score” from your matrix to see which topic was rated the highest. During this process you need to really try to be as impartial as you possibly can be so as not to complete

the matrix just to show that your initial topic that you thought about came out on top! It will be invaluable for you to put in some time and effort during this process of choosing a topic – the research journey is challenging enough by nature and you want to make it easier for yourself by any means possible including by choosing a topic that will work for you.

2. **Not planning the entire journey properly** – Unless you are doing a pure research master's degree, the work you are about to do forms the last part of the requirements for completion of your degree. You will most probably have only about 6 to 12 months to complete this, depending on the weight this subject carries in terms of the requirements of the specific school where you are studying. Realise that you have very limited time and that you need to plan and execute appropriately. Students tend to spend too much time on the following:
 - the literature study;
 - gathering the primary data (questionnaires, interviews, experimental results, etc.)
 - interpreting data and developing recommendations; and
 - editing and putting the entire end product together

What to do about it: You need to realise that you have very limited time to complete your research journey, and that at least the above mentioned aspects usually take longer than you anticipated. Draw up a schedule at the beginning of your journey linked to specific milestone dates – then commit to stick to the milestones meticulously! Arrange dates for reviews by your supervisor way ahead of time, and pre-book a timeslot with your editor in advance. Remember that there is most probably going to be an avalanche of students clambering for the editor's attention all at the same time. Consider using software like "grammarly" or something similar during your writing and do a spell-check before submitting your work to an editor (I know, it sounds very basic but many of us forget to do it!). This way you will optimise the time the editor spends on your work, doing real editing and not correcting simple spelling errors. Put a "hard stop" date on your calendar for completion of your literature study and stick to it. This is the one area where you can easily go down a rabbit hole and spend too much time. Make friends with your specialist research librarian and optimise your use of their services – they are eager to assist on your journey and they have specialist skills sifting through mountains of data and then making sense out of it. Decide on a process or software plug-in to capture every and all references before you start the journey – this way you will save time by simply having to edit references at the end and not mindlessly trying to find them when you are completing your document. Applying these few tips will save you valuable time during your research journey – something you have a very limited amount of!

3. **Not clearly defining the problem statement and misaligning with objectives & research questions** – Simply describing the context of your research problem is not a clear statement of the problem! This is an issue that I see regularly when externally examining research papers. It is such a fundamental part of the research that it simply has to be done right to set the scene for the rest of the reader's journey.

What to do about it: After contextualising the problem clearly, dedicate a short paragraph explicitly stating the problem. Make sure that it is clear for a reader that doesn't have your

exposure to the problem. The objectives of your study should then logically follow from the problem statement, supported by enough clear and succinct questions to answer all the relevant issues that you are planning to solve. Stick to a maximum of 4 to 5 objectives with supporting questions. Remember that this is also your opportunity to clearly delineate, or “scope” your research. See it as analogous to the white lines around a sports field, dictating where you will play. The problem statement should include as many of the “five **Whiskies** in a **hotel**” – include the why, what, when, where, who and how of the problem you are going to address as you can practically include in the problem definition paragraph. Use these simple questions to ask once you have written a first draft of your problem statement. Does the statement include the why, what, when, etcetera of what you will be researching? As a last pointer, ask someone completely foreign to the field of study to read the problem statement and ask them if it is clear and succinct to them. This will generally give you a very good idea whether others will easily get what you are researching.

4. **Doing a poor literature study** – The literature study, as mentioned above, is the one aspect of your research that can use up an incredible amount of your available time, unless you plan and do it efficiently. Be vigilant and keep yourself disciplined in doing this process. You need to constantly guard against going down a rabbit hole!

What to do about it: Create a “Picture” of the landscape around your problem statement. Use your preference of bullet pointed lists of main themes and sub-themes, or use a mind map to create this picture. This will help you develop an understanding of the central themes of your research, as well as the areas of study that are bordering it. Develop the skill of scanning the abstract (or executive summary) and table of contents of the specific reference source you are looking at. Do it quickly (chunk your time into 15 minute blocks) and determine whether it is relevant OR NOT. Then either log the reference and put it on your list to investigate further, or discard it. Make a list of high, medium and low relevance of the sources you are investigating. This will help you determine a minimum list of sources to investigate further in the next step of the process. If a source does not fit into the proposed categories of relevance, discard it quickly. See the landscape of literature around your problem statement as a discussion – make sure the reader gets the most important themes of the discussion, as well as where your research fits into the discussion and why it is important. Create a logical storyline for the literature study based on the context you created around the problem statement earlier. Another technique that can be of help here is to use a large piece of brown paper or “butcher paper” – (yes, the kind of stuff your local butcher rolls your meat in when you buy it!), stick it to a wall, and then use “Post-it” notes of various colours to visually create the landscape I referred to above. You can then easily move the notes around if you decide on a better “flow” for the literature study until you get to a picture that is clear and succinct.

5. **Sub-standard referencing** – This is such a simple and almost mechanical process that needs to be followed but still so many research students don’t get it right. As the creator of a piece of research that will add to the overall body of knowledge and that will exist forever in the

public domain, you want to get this right so that it doesn't detract from the quality of the rest of your good work.

What to do about it: First of all – find out what the accepted or preferred method of referencing is for your specific school and area of study – every school or area of study has its own preference in terms of what method they prefer to be used in dissertations. Adhere to this! Develop a specific understanding of how to reference the different kinds of sources correctly. Now go back to the process you put in place at the beginning of your journey and make sure that it uses this specific referencing style (Investigate specific software tools to keep track of your references – it will save you precious time in the end!). I know that this statement is a repeat of what I said before, but it is that important in terms of optimally using the limited time you have available! Put a process in place BEFORE YOU START READING THE FIRST REFERENCE, to properly log each and every reference you work with during your research. If you don't start logging your references from the very first day as you start your journey, you are invariably going to get way down the line realising that you have not logged some of them! It is a painful process indeed to have to find those elusive references that become critical aspects of the reference landscape as you progress and you want to finalise your document!

I hope this helped a little in showing you what some of the most common mistakes are that most of us make when we do research, but most importantly – what to do about it! Still a little overwhelmed, concerned or even in pain when you think about your research? Could you use some additional help with your research, specifically from an examiner and supervisor's perspective? If you want to know more, get support, or simply want to be notified of the launch of the "Crash course in research success", please email your contact details to me at Jacques@topresearchsupport.com Early bird subscribers will qualify for substantial discounts and bonuses when I launch the course! Good luck on your research journey!