

# PICKING A TOPIC AND DEVELOPING A RESEARCH QUESTION IN GEOGRAPHY AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

If you've watched our introductory video on Developing a Research Question, you'll know that to create a research question we suggest you follow five basic steps:

One, pick a topic; two, narrow the topic; three, list some questions; four, pick a question; and five, focus the question. You may wonder, "how does this work in practice?"

To answer this, we'll follow the case of Jill, a Geography student, who used this method to pick a topic and develop a question for her research paper.

Recently, Jill took the Coastal Processes and Landforms course. The course had a research paper assignment. Jill knew after reading the chapter in her textbook that covered beach environments that she wanted to write her paper on this topic.

That's because Jill loves the beach.

Jill is from Fort Erie, Ontario. All her life, Jill has loved going to the beaches in the area, like Crystal Beach, Waverly Beach, and Pleasant Beach, and she was very interested in these specific beach environments.

She knew that her initial topic was too broad, so she decided to narrow it by looking at one issue mentioned in her text, coastal erosion.

But that topic was still very broad, so the next step in Jill's approach was to narrow the topic further. To do this, Jill started to write out some different aspects of the topic.

From her textbook, she listed out some processes that lead to coastal erosion, such as supply of sand, and sea level rise.

She listed some methods that are applied to prevent erosion, such as seawalls and tidal barriers...

...and she listed some management strategies that have been implemented to deal with erosion, such as policies or planning.

Another way Jill narrowed the topic was by adding a specific geographical component - the north shore of Lake Erie near Fort Erie.

Then, Jill listed out some questions on these aspects, such as: What morphological changes are occurring on the Lake Erie coastline and what coastal management strategies have been developed for the beaches around Fort Erie? Jill decided to focus on the management of coastal erosion in the Fort Erie area.

As Jill continued to read in her textbook, she came across a discussion of the integrated coastal management approach, a relatively recent approach to coastal zone management that takes into account a fuller range of factors and issues affecting a stretch of coastline.

She decided to include the integrated coastal management approach into her research topic.

Once Jill had some preliminary questions, she began to conduct some initial research using one of the library's research databases - GeoBase. She used GeoBase because she knew it would help her find peer-reviewed research articles, and that it focused specifically on geography and environmental studies research.

She used the keywords "coastal zone management" and "Lake Erie" to get an idea of how much scholarly research has been done on this topic.

She found a number of articles that seemed relevant and read their abstracts and conclusions.

Jill downloaded and saved the citations of these papers so that she could later indicate where she got her ideas from when formulating her research question and thesis statement.

Some of these preliminary findings even indicated to her the direction her own research might take.

At this point, Jill was able to formulate her research question as: "What integrated coastal management principles have been implemented along the Lake Erie North Shore to manage coastal erosion?"

Using some of the research she already found, Jill was also able to turn this question into a thesis statement.

Her thesis basically stated that: "Integrated coastal management principles have not been implemented in the Lake Erie North Shore region due to lack of coordination between various levels of government."

Jill was then able to proceed with a more comprehensive literature review, and undertake the rest of her research.

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