

GRADUATE WRITING: STRATEGIES FOR FINDING A FOCUS OR RESEARCH INTEREST AND BEGINNING YOUR RESEARCH

Graduate writing often involves a process of exploring an area or issue to find out what you think about it or what you want to investigate. From that point you may go on to develop a thesis, a research study, a conference presentation or an article for publication.

FINDING A FOCUS

You may begin your program with a very clear idea of what you want to research; alternatively, you may begin with no clear direction other than an interest in the field. As you study you will need to discover and then pursue your own interests in relation to your field.

HOW TO FIND A FOCUS OR RESEARCH INTEREST:

- Read widely to gain a broad sense of what is involved in your field; find out who the major players are, who are the key names associated with it. As you read, be alert to studies or research directions that particularly interest you. Take the time to follow up on them by searching for recent studies on that topic or for additional works by the same author who interests you. When you read, don't read in-depth and take copious notes - read to sample ideas. If you feel that what you read is important, jot down a very brief three point summary of what you read:
 1. What is the main issue the article discussed?
 2. What was the approach the authors took to exploring the topic?
 3. Does this article lead anywhere else i.e. to other authors or references or points you want to follow up on?
- Keep a journal to reflect on ideas as you read, to keep a record of your thoughts and interests about your field. Put down ideas as they come to you. Take time to think about what you are reading. Keeping a notebook or journal in this way can be very valuable because graduate work is all about getting in touch with what YOU think, what you want to explore and find out. In this way you are developing your position as a scholar in this field, as a member of this scholarly community, as someone who one day will publish and add to this field. So, take the time to make this transition from learning about theorists and researchers, to actually becoming one.

BEGINNING RESEARCH

As you begin to develop your ideas and focus, formulate some question(s) as a way to begin your research. For example, imagine that you want to learn about the causes of selective mutism in elementary children in order to develop therapeutic approaches to help children overcome this problem.

Questions you might ask could be

What is selective mutism?

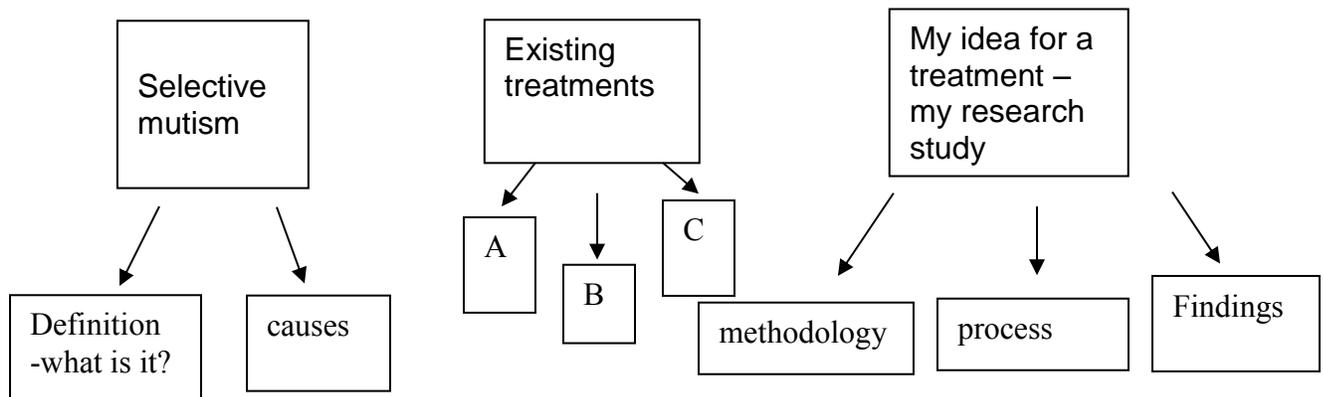
What are the causes?

What treatments are used?-- Are they effective?

What can I suggest as a treatment? How can I test this out?

Within these questions, you have identified several important words that will need exploring—underlined above. You can use these words to create a diagram of idea to help organize and structure your research and eventual writing:

RESEARCH INTO SELECTIVE MUTISM



Once you have explored ideas in this way you are likely to realize what your specific research question should be. Your research question will give you a starting point for your research and your writing will contain key terms that will be the basis for your exploring of ideas, and this in turn will help direct you towards what to read.