Helping Students to Develop Effective Research Topics

To help students develop narrower, more manageable research topics:

- Provide samples of too broad, very good, and too narrow topics, making certain to discuss the differences in class. This could become a game, where students place topics in the three categories--with rationale to support their choices.
- Have students give feedback to each other on topic proposals/questions/pitches in small groups or pairs after the class has discussed what an effective topic is.
- Have students submit an initial topic of interest early on using Google forms so you can provide feedback and direction (i.e., provide them with scholars' names or suggestions for journals to seek out so they find out more about the topic and see what questions others have asked.)
- Give students practice with mapping out questions (i.e., breaking research questions into more specific questions so they learn how complex a topic is).

To help students develop topics that fit the criteria:

- Provide sample topics so you can explain how and why topics fit the criteria. Or provide students with a sample topic and have them analyze why and how that fits your stated criteria.
- Specify very explicitly in the assignment criteria how you expect students to use their research (e.g., Develop an argument? Report or summarize findings? Provide an overview of the literature?).

To help students do real research rather than deciding on a conclusion and researching that set answer:

- *Give them more time than you think they'll need.* Introduce the assignment and discuss sample or practice topics weeks in advance of a due date.
- Emphasize the difference between reporting and research, and ask what students have done in the past—reporting or truly researching.
- Warn students that they might feel frustrated or uncertain because they won't know what "the answer" is right away. And remind them that this is ok—even expected.

- Encourage students to see research as an ongoing undertaking—even the project they're currently working on is a step in a longer, larger conversation. This can help to let them know that they can identify gaps in the research, which could lead others to seeing what additional research on a topic needs to be done.
- Check in with the students and provide feedback throughout the process.

To help students work on meaningful comparisons and analysis, rather than just description:

- Have students write about their sources using an annotated bibliography or literature review so they specify how the sources relate to each other (i.e., overlapping ideas, advances in thinking, challenges to arguments, etc.). Even having them answer some key questions about their sources in bullet form can help.
- Discuss examples that highlight how you expect students to use sources. This can help students understand better what they should keep in mind as they're researching and what they will do with the information they find.
- Continue to be explicit about what you expect them to do. Many students will think they're supposed to form their own argument, but what "argument" signifies can differ dramatically between disciplines.

To help students understand background information and use it to develop a thesis question:

- Give credit for initial research bursts by giving low-stakes credit or extra credit when students find some initial sources and write an explanation about why they find some of those effective while others might need to be discarded. This encourages students to reason through the decisions they're making about what to use, and you can check to see if they're just discarding sources because they complicate a topic.
- Have students access some initial sources and ask them to specify what gaps in the research those texts identify.
- Remind students that all researchers are trying to answer questions, so have them identify what those questions are for each source they read.

To help students who need research assistance in a mixed-level course:

- Use a brief survey at the start of class to determine what past research projects students have completed, what they have struggled with, and what has worked for them. You might then pair up students so novice students can learn from more experienced researchers. Or take time in class to remark on and discuss answers to the survey questions that you find your students would learn from.