UVM Graduate Writing Center
Three Approaches to Discerning a Research Story

This strategy helps you identify and examine your research story from three perspectives. Each perspective poses questions which can be adapted to your project. Answering these questions may help you articulate your ideas, make connections, and discover the narrative arc—the story—of pertinent research on this topic and your thesis or dissertation’s contribution.

1. Describe and Distinguish
This perspective emphasizes defining distinctive features of your subject. It is drawn from the physics concept of the particle—one distinct unit. If your subject is complex, it might be helpful to describe it at the macro-level and then to describe each component individually.

- What’s distinctive to you about your subject? To those in your writing context?
- How would you describe your subject to someone in your context? What would be familiar to that person, drawing upon shared knowledge and assumptions?
- What in your approach or findings would be unfamiliar, surprising, new, or controversial to that person? What can you draw upon to define, describe, illustrate, explain, and/or defend your approach or finding so that someone else in your context understands and feels persuaded?
- How would you describe your subject to someone not in your context? What would be familiar to that person, drawing upon shared knowledge and assumptions? What would be unfamiliar? What can you draw upon to describe, explain, and illustrate your subject so that someone not in your context understands?
- How would you explain to someone not in your context the significance of work being done on this topic? How would you explain the difference, the contribution you are making—how the world (or at least your particular research corner of the world) will be different because of your approach to and findings on this subject?

2. Trace Moves and Changes
This perspective is drawn from the physics concept of the wave. It emphasizes changes that occur over time, either as they are prompted by significant events or as they gradually evolve. The questions below ask you to consider both your subject and your relationship to it.

- How has your subject changed over time? How do these changes relate to the question you are investigating?
- What changes have occurred in the way others examine your subject? Why?
- What events have shaped or co-occurred with these changes?
- What larger cultural changes have influenced your subject? (e.g., the changing roles of women, the end of the Cold War, the discovery of the quark, the invention of social media)
- How did your experience with the subject begin?
- How have you, your attitudes, or assumptions about this subject changed? What about those in your context? What about those not in your context?

3. Map Networks and Relationships
This perspective emphasizes connections between your subject and ideas, subjects, and cultural values and practices. It is drawn from the physics concept of the field, the multitude of particles co-existing, interacting (or not) and exerting mutual influence (or not) in particular ways and for particular reasons.

- Group your subject. By placing your subject into a larger group, you can make connections between your subject and the characteristics of the larger group, constructing important features in a more generalize framework or distinguishing more clearly what is and what is not within the scope of your research project. For instance, your project might be concerned with a particular genetic mutation that falls under the larger subject heading of colon and prostate cancers and that is related to the broader study of cancer proteins.
- Compare or contrast your subject. Identify both points of similarity and difference between your subject and others or between your research approach and findings and the approaches and findings of other researchers. How are the similarities and differences interesting or important? What questions or arguments do they generate? For instance, while other researchers are investigating enzymes that seem linked
- Examine cultural narratives, story lines, assumptions, stereotypes, and prejudices that apply to your subject—both those held by specialists in your field and those held by nonspecialists. Naming these can help you analyze their influence on your subject and the kinds of beliefs, attitudes, and lines of inquiry you are writing with and against.

Review Your Ideas: Review the material you’ve generated and look for productive or intriguing connections, new avenues of exploration, new explanations you’ve been searching for…anything that keeps you moving forward.