



University of Vermont Graduate Writing Center

Discerning and Refining a Research Story

Use these questions to help you articulate, refine, and focus the research story you want to tell *and* to help you identify the literature that is and isn't most pertinent to helping you tell that story.

1. Describe and Distinguish

- What's distinctive—fascinating, perplexing, challenging, exciting—to *you* about your subject?
- How would you describe your subject to a *specialist in your field*? What would be familiar to that person? What would be unfamiliar, surprising, new, maybe controversial? What can you draw upon—in the existing literature and from your research—to define, describe, illustrate, explain, and/or defend your approach or finding so that another specialist in your field understands and feels persuaded?
- How would you describe your subject to someone *not* in your field—someone generally acquainted with the field but not with your specialty? What would be familiar? What would be unfamiliar? What can you draw upon to describe, explain, and illustrate your approach or finding so that this person understands your project *and* its significance? How can you explain what's changed (what problem solved, what gap addressed etc.) or could be changed in the world because of your project?

2. Trace Moves and Changes

- How has your subject changed or how has the way people examine your subject changed over time? How do these changes relate to the question you are investigating?
- Have any larger cultural, scientific, political, ecological, or social changes influenced your subject? (e.g., the end of the Cold War, the discovery of the quark, the invention of social media, growing concern about climate change and climate refugees)
- How have *your* attitudes toward or assumptions about this subject changed? How have the attitudes or assumptions of others *in your field* changed when it comes to this topic? How have attitudes and assumptions of people *not in your field* changed?

3. Map Networks and Relationships

- Group your subject. By placing your subject into a larger group or field(s), you can make connections between your subject and the characteristics of the larger group, constructing

important features in a more generalized 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?
- 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.