Effective, stress-free research begins with establishing a solid, manageable topic. The Five Ws, a method employed by journalists, can help you define a workable research focus.

If you don’t know a lot about a topic that interests you, do a little research. An encyclopedia entry can provide you with a broad overview of a topic while browsing the abstracts of journal articles can provide you with very specific examples of how other writers are approaching your area of interest.

Try it! Review the examples on the back of this sheet. Then, use the blank fields (far right) to narrow down your topic by utilizing the Five Ws. Remember, these are just guiding questions; you don’t have to use all of them.

The above filters provide a framework for crafting a manageable research topic. You are not required to use them all. However, keep the following in mind: the more filters you use, the narrower your topic will be & the fewer filters you use, the broader your topic will be.
... asks you to consider an individual or select population with whom your research is concerned. This could be a character in a short story, a class of machines, a species of plant or animal, a group of people, etc.

Who?

... asks you consider a specific aspect or element that directly concerns or impacts the chosen individual or population.

What?

... asks you to consider an appropriate timeframe to which you might limit your research focus. Depending on your topic, an appropriate timeframe could encompass a single day or several centuries.

When?

... asks you to consider an appropriate geographical location to which you might limit your research focus. Depending on your topic, an appropriate geographical location could encompass a single city block or an entire continent.

Where?

... asks you to consider the reasons for which your research on this particular topic is important and meaningful.

Why?

The above filters provide a framework for crafting a manageable research topic. You are not required to use them all. However, keep the following in mind: the more filters you use, the narrower your topic will be & the fewer filters you use, the broader your topic will be.

Topic

Who?

Who?

Who?

Sharks

Consumption as a Food Product

Recruitment

Who?

Who?

Who?

Child Soldiers

Present

1994

United States

Rwanda

Why?

Why?

Why?

Overconsumption of shark products could lead to the extinction of some shark species which could negatively impact aquatic ecosystems.

The Environmental Impact of Overconsumption of Shark Products in the U.S.A.

Rwanda: A Case Study in the Recruitment of Child Soldiers

By understanding the methods & motivations behind organizations’ recruitment of child soldiers, opponents can devise tactics to end the practice.