3: Planning for an Answer

3.1 Propose Some Working Answers

3.1.1 Decide on a Working Hypothesis

3.1.2 If You Can't Find an Answer, Argue for Your Question

3.2 Build a Storyboard to Plan and Guide Your Work

3.2.1 State Your Question and Working Hypotheses

3.2.2 State Your Reasons

3.2.3 Sketch in the Kind of Evidence You Should Look For

3.1 Propose Some Working Answers

Before you get far into your project, try one more preliminary step. It’s one that many beginners resist but that experienced researchers rely on, so start practicing it now. As soon as you have a question, imagine some plausible answers, no matter how sketchy or speculative. At this stage, don’t worry whether they’re right. That comes later.

For example, suppose you ask, Why do some religions use masks in ceremonies while others don't? You might speculate:

- Maybe cultures with many spirits need masks to distinguish them.
- Maybe masks are common in cultures that mix religion and medicine.
- Maybe religions originating in the Middle East were influenced by the Jewish prohibition against idolatry.

You can look for evidence with only a question to guide you, if you stay on the alert for those data that suggest an answer. But it is more useful to research guided by possible answers. You will then see more readily which data might support (or contradict) a possible answer, helping you focus your reading even more.

QUICK TIP

Write, Don’t Just Think

Even early in your project, write out your answers as fully as you can. It is easy to think that you have a clear idea when you don’t. Putting a foggy idea into words is the best way to clarify it, or to discover that you can’t.

3.1.1 Decide on a Working Hypothesis

If one answer seems most promising, call it your working hypothesis. Even the most tentative working hypothesis helps you to think ahead, especially about the kind of evidence that you’ll need to support it. For example, will you need numbers? Quotations? Observations? Images? Historical facts? If you can
imagine the kind of evidence you’ll need before you start looking for it, you’ll recognize the data you need when you see them.

Some new researchers are afraid to consider any working hypothesis early in their project, because they fear it might bias their thinking. There is a risk, if that hypothesis blinds you to a better idea or keeps you from giving it up when the evidence says you should. As in all relationships, don’t fall too hard for your first hypothesis: the more you like it, the less easily you’ll see its flaws. Even so, it’s better to start with a flawed hypothesis than with none at all.

If you can’t imagine any working hypothesis, consider changing your question. That might cost time in the short run, but it may save you from a failed project. Under no circumstances put off thinking about a working hypothesis until you begin drafting your report or, worse, until you’ve almost finished it. Drafting and revising can be acts of discovery, and as you develop your report, you may discover a better answer to your question. Just don’t wait until the last page to make that discovery.

3.1.2 If You Can’t Find an Answer, Argue for Your Question
We have focused on answering questions so much that you might think that your project fails if you can’t answer yours. In fact, many important researchers have argued that a question no one has asked should be, even though the researcher can’t answer it. You can write a good paper explaining why your question is important and what it would take to find a good answer.

3.2 Build a Storyboard to Plan and Guide Your Work
For a two- or three-page paper, you might not need much of a plan—a sketch of an outline might do. But for a longer project, you’ll need more. The first plan that comes to mind is usually a formal outline, with its I’s and II’s and A’s and B’s and so on. An outline is better than no plan, but the problem with an outline is that it can force you to lock down your paper before you’ve done your best thinking. So if your teacher requires an outline, be ready to change it at the first sign that you can do better.

Many researchers, especially those outside the academic world, plan long reports on what is called a storyboard. A storyboard is like an outline broken into pieces and spread over several pages, with lots of space for adding data and ideas as you go. Storyboards are more flexible than outlines. You can leave storyboard pages unfinished until you are ready to fill them, and you can move pages around without reprinting every time you try out a new organization. Storyboards also help you think about organization. You can spread pages across a wall, group related pages, and put minor sections below major ones to create a “picture” of your project that shows at a glance the design of the whole and your progress through it.
3.2.1 State Your Question and Working Hypotheses

To start a storyboard, write at the top of its first page your question and working hypothesis as exactly as you can. At the bottom, add alternative answers so that you can see more clearly the limits and strengths of your favored one. Add new hypotheses as you think of them, and cross off those you prove wrong. But save them all, because you might be able to use a rejected one in your introduction (see I used to think . . ., but . . . in 7.2.2).

3.2.2 State Your Reasons

Imagine explaining your project to a friend. You say, I want to show that Alamo stories helped develop a unique Texan identity, and your friend asks, Why do you think so? Your reasons are the sentences that back up your answer: Well, first, the stories distorted facts to emphasize what became central to Texan identity. Second, the stories were first used to show that Texas (and the Wild West) was a new kind of frontier. Third, . . . and so on. List each of the reasons that might support your hypothesis at the top of a page, one reason per page.

If you have only one or two reasons, you’ll probably need more. Make your best guess about possible reasons, and put them at the tops of separate pages: Reason 3: Something about Alamo stories making Texans feel special? If you know only how you want a reason to support your answer, state that: Reason 4: Something about Alamo stories being more than just myth. Each reason, of course, needs support, so for each reason, ask: Why do I think that? What evidence will I need to prove it? That will help you focus your search for evidence.

If you’re new to your topic or early in your project, all of your reasons may be only educated guesses that you will have to change as you learn more. In fact, if you don’t change any of your reasons, you might not be self-critical enough. But a list of reasons, no matter how speculative, is the best framework to guide your research and focus your thinking, and certainly better than no reasons at all.

QUICK TIP

Try Out Several Orders

When you plan a first draft, you will have to decide what is the best order for its parts, so you might as well try to find a good one now. Lay out your storyboard pages on a table or tape them to a wall. Then step back and look at their order. Can you see a logic in that order? Try out different ones—chronology, cause and effect, relative importance, complexity, length, and so on. (For more principles of order, see 7.2.5.) Don’t be afraid to play around with this storyboard: it’s not your final plan, just a way to guide your thinking, plan your research, and organize what you find.
Sketch in the Kind of Evidence You Should Look For

Every field likes to see its own kinds of evidence. Psychologists, economists, and sociologists look for numbers. Literary scholars want quotations. Field biologists like to see observations, pictures, and diagrams. So for each reason, sketch the kind of evidence that you think you’ll need to support it.

Although you may be used to finding all of your evidence in the form of quotations from secondary sources, focus here on primary evidence from primary sources (see 4.1.1). Don’t read about the Gettysburg Address; get a copy. And don’t neglect quantitative data. You have more access to good data than ever before, and it is not acceptable to offer as evidence your mere observation that more women are attending college when with one quick search you can find U.S. census data showing that from 1994 to 2004 the number of women with a college degree increased by 7 percent.

If you can’t imagine the kind of evidence you’ll need, leave that part of the page blank.

WORKING IN GROUPS

Tell and Retell Your Elevator Story

As soon as you have a working hypothesis and a few reasons, create an elevator story. Imagine that you step in an elevator and find your teacher, who asks, “So, how’s the paper going? What do you expect to say?” You have only a couple of floors to sum up where you are. Early on, you can use this plan:

I am working on the problem of [state your question].

I think I can show that [state your hypothesis] because [state your reasons].

My best evidence is [summarize your evidence].

If you have a writing group, have everyone tell their elevator story at the start of every meeting. If not, tell yours to anyone who will listen—even your dog will do. As you learn more and your argument develops, refine your elevator story and tell it again. The more often you encapsulate your argument in an elevator story, the sooner your paper will come together.