

## Define your research topic

Interested in applying to do a research degree in the School of Art, Architecture and Design at the University of South Australia?

First you must decide the intended focus or area of your research project – it should be something you know enough about to determine whether it is really a viable, 'researchable' topic. Successful applications usually outline a well-defined research problem or area of focus linked to a body of literature that discusses some of the issues relevant to the proposed topic. If you are uncertain of your proposed topic, try to define what you want to do or find out.

### **1. Start with a subject or area you know relatively well, or with what interests you most in your professional activity**

Remember that the best research comes out of a deeply rooted curiosity, interest or passion, and not some hope for short-term financial or career gain.

To identify your research topic, therefore, you will need to think carefully about what really interests you, and try to relate this to what you already know, perhaps from previous studies (ie the final years of your degree), from your professional practice, or from your reading.

### **2. Read widely about two or three subjects that interest you**

If you are a bit uncertain, make a list of *up to three topics or areas* that really interest you, and then do a bit of reading on them, making notes of any issues or problems, or areas that seem particularly interesting, challenging or where existing approaches seem problematic to you. You will also need to think about the theories most closely related to what interests you.

For example, if you are interested in office design and also in environmental psychology, you might in your reading come across a theory concerning people's apparent need or preference for natural light and outdoor views in their working environment, and a related theory about their preferences for nature ('biophilia'). This particular real-life example (taken from a School honours project), after some further targeted reading, led to a well-defined topic, that eventuated in a first class honours thesis on 'biophilia', user preference and contemporary office design.

By reading widely about two or three subjects that interest you, you will find that one particular subject 'jumps out' as particularly interesting. At this point it is still important not to simply opt for that subject or area, since it is very possible that your own questions and ideas about the subject are still 'naïve' and have already been studied, or are being studied, in some depth.

### **3. Keep your options open**

For this reason it is vital to ‘keep your options open’ for the first month or so of your preliminary investigation, or search for a topic. A research degree is an opportunity to further develop a specialisation in your discipline, or to further develop an interest you might have had for some time. It must be in an area that you can see yourself reading and writing in or on for at least 2 years (for a Masters) and up to 4 (for a PhD).

### **4. Limit the research topic**

A viable research topic usually comprises a focus limited to a certain set of ideas, persons or objects, a certain timeframe, a place or places, and certain limiting conditions, often viewed through one or more related theories or viewpoints.

For example, ‘The Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and its influence in post-war Italy’ might be a ‘researchable’ topic for study in architectural history because it includes one person’s architecture and its influence within a particular country within a particular period. An associated theoretical literature might include various Italian debates between ‘rationalists’ and ‘organicists’ (those who followed or were influenced by Wright).

While this topic may or may not be a suitable topic (and you could only find out if it is or is not by considerable reading), it demonstrates that topic definition is usually specific. It necessarily involves gathering a strictly limited amount of information within a specific timeframe.

### **5. Define the research topic**

Once you feel satisfied that you have found a promising topic, you can start trying to define it. Keep the other topic (or other two topics) you have been reading about ‘in reserve’, in case this one you are focusing on does not work out.

This process of definition takes time. Bear in mind that this is a reflective process, demanding a lot of thought, and sometimes quite a bit of inspiration. You will also benefit greatly from having conversations about your ideas with academics who specialise in this area. (See [What you can study](#) or [Key staff](#) for more information.)

### **6. Create a statement about the research topic**

Traditionally, a topic’s definition is usually first embodied in a statement about the project. To write this statement, start by naming your topic (keep in mind that the definition below is for the purpose of illustration only):

'I am learning about / working on / studying....' – For example, say you might want to look at design for Aboriginal housing. Thus your statement would become: 'I am interested in studying design for Aboriginal housing'.

Now ask yourself a series of questions in order to limit this focus further: what problems exactly are you trying to solve? What kind of housing? Where? When? Who or which group of people? Under what particular circumstances?

Once you have a shortlist of such questions, try rewriting your statement: 'I am learning about / working on / studying... ' – 'the design of Aboriginal housing in contemporary remote South Australian settlements' – '... because I want to find out who / what / where / when / whether / how / why...' – 'because I want to find out whether existing designs address the needs of these communities adequately – and if not why not'.

### **7. Include a rationale in your question**

By including a rationale in your question, the research problem can then be identified. To do this, add a qualifier to your question: 'I am studying....because....in order to understand...'

The end result, in the above example, might read something like this: 'I am studying the design of Aboriginal housing in contemporary remote South Australian settlements because I want to find out whether existing designs address the needs of these communities adequately, in order to understand these needs and their cultural relations more fully.'

Don't feel that you have to have a practical 'solution' outcome to your project. Understanding, a richer knowledge, and (potentially) a more reflective design practice, is quite a sufficient and significant outcome. It is certainly a more impressive outcome than rushing in to find a 'practical solution' before the hard work of understanding the background, issues and related theory is completed.

The aim of all this definition is to explain what the focus of your research is (the topic) what you don't know and want to know about it (the question), and why you need to know about it (the rationale).

### **8. Write two or three short paragraphs outlining your topic**

Once you are reasonably happy with your definition, try writing two or three short paragraphs outlining your topic.

List beneath this outline of your intended research project 5-7 texts that are relevant to your discussion. This brief outline can now become something that you can show to a potential supervisor. See [Is a research degree supervisor available?](#)