# 2

# Selecting a Suitable Topic

T he selection of an appropriate topic is the first major challenge in conducting research. In many academic settings, this task is simplified by working with a faculty mentor who is already familiar with an interesting area of study and may even have defined one or more researchable questions. On the other hand, you may not be blessed with a faculty role model who is actively engaged in research in an area of interest to you. There are no simple rules for selecting a topic of interest, but there are some considerations for making a decision as to appropriateness. It is generally unwise to define something as important as a dissertation topic without first obtaining a broad familiarity with the field. This implies a large amount of exploring the literature and talking with the experts. Without this initial exploration you can neither know the range of possibilities of interesting topics nor have a clear idea of what is already known. Most students obtain their research topics from the loose ends they discover in reading within an area, from an interesting observation they have made ("I notice that men shut up when a beautiful woman enters the room; I wonder what the effect of physical attractiveness is on group process?"), or from an applied focus in their lives or professional work ("I have a difficult time treating these alcoholics and want to discover how best to work with them"). Another strategy is to consult with leading scholars in an area of interest and ask them for advice on profitable topics to pursue. Most are happy to talk to and share materials with enthusiastic doctoral students who are obviously familiar with the expert's prior work.

## Some Guidelines for Topic Selection

Here are some guidelines for deciding if a topic is appropriate as a dissertation subject.

1. A topic needs to sustain your interest over a long period of time. A suggested study on learning nonsense syllables under two sets of environmental conditions may sound appealing in its simplicity, but remember Finagle's first law of research: If something can go wrong, it will go wrong! Dissertations usually take at least twice as much time as anticipated, and there are few worse fates than slaving hour after hour on a project that you abhor. Remember too that all dissertations are recorded and published with the Library of Congress, and you will always be associated with your particular study.

2. At the other extreme, it is wise to avoid a topic that is overly ambitious and overly challenging. Most students want to graduate, preferably within a reasonable period of time. Grandiose dissertations have a way of never being completed, and even the best dissertations end up being compromises among your own ambition, the wishes of your committee, and practical circumstances. It is not realistic for a dissertation to say everything there is to say about a particular topic (e.g., the European Common Market), and you need to temper your enthusiasm with pragmatism. As one student put it, "There are two types of dissertations: the great ones and those that are completed!" Sometimes it makes sense to select a research topic on the basis of convenience or workability and use the luxury of the postgraduate years to pursue more esoteric topics of personal interest.

3. We suggest that you avoid topics that may be linked too closely with emotional issues in your own life. It always makes sense to choose a topic that is interesting and personally meaningful. Some students, however, try to use a dissertation to resolve an emotional issue or solve a personal problem. For example, even if you think you have successfully overcome the personal impact of the death of your child, this is a topic to be avoided. It will necessarily stir up emotional issues that may easily get in the way of completing the dissertation.

4. A related issue is selecting a topic in which you have a personal ax to grind. Remember that conducting research demands ruthless honesty and objectivity. If you initiate a study to demonstrate that men are no damned good, you will be able neither to allow yourself the sober reflections of

good research nor to acknowledge the possibility that your conclusions may contradict your expectations. It is much better to begin with a hunch ("I've noticed that men don't do very well with housekeeping. I wonder if that has something to do with being pampered as children") and to regard the research as an adventurous exploration to shed light on this topic rather than as a polemical exercise to substantiate your point of view.

5. Finally, you need to select a topic that has the potential to make an original contribution to the field and allow you to demonstrate your independent mastery of subject and method. In other words, the topic must be worth pursuing. At the very least, the study must generate or help validate theoretical understanding in an area or, in those fields where applied dissertations are permissible, contribute to the development of professional practice. Some students are put off when they discover that a literature review contains contradictory or puzzling results or explanations for a phenomenon. Such contradictions should be taken not as setbacks and reasons to steer away from a topic but as opportunities to resolve a mystery. When people disagree or when existing explanations seem inadequate, there is often room for a critical study to be conducted.

## From Interesting Idea to Research Question

Let us assume that you have identified a general area of research and that your choice has been based on curiosity and may involve resolving a problem, explaining a phenomenon, uncovering a process by which something occurs, demonstrating the truth of a hidden fact, building on or reevaluating other studies, or testing some theory in your field. To know whether or not the topic is important (significant) you must also be familiar with the literature in the area. Later, we present a number of suggestions for conducting a good review and assessment of the literature. In the meantime, we have noticed that many students have difficulty transforming an interesting idea into a researchable question, and we have designed a simple exercise to help in that endeavor.

Researchable questions almost invariably involve the relationship between two or more variables, phenomena, concepts, or ideas. The nature of that relationship may vary. Research studies generally consist of methods to explicate the nature of the relationship. Research in the social sciences rarely consists of explicating a single construct (e.g., "I will look at everything there is to know about the 'imposter phenomenon'") or a single variable (e.g., voting rates in presidential elections).[1] Even the presence of two

variables is apt to be limiting, and oftentimes it is only when a third "connecting" variable is invoked that an idea becomes researchable.

An example might help to demonstrate how the introduction of an additional variable can lead to the birth of a promising study. Let us assume that I am interested in how the elderly are perceived by a younger generation. At this level, a study would be rather mundane and likely to lead to a "so what?" response. So far it implies asking people what they think of the elderly, perhaps using interviews or tests or even behavioral observations. But we really won't learn much about perceptions of the elderly in contemporary society. Introducing a second variable, however, can lead to a set of questions that have promising theoretical (as well as practical) implications: I wonder what the role of the media is in shaping social perceptions of the elderly? I wonder if living with a grandparent makes any difference in how the elderly are viewed? I wonder how specific legislation designed to benefit the elderly has changed our perception of them? I wonder if there is a relationship between how middle-aged adults deal with their aging parents and how they view the elderly? The new variables that were introduced in these potential research questions were, respectively, the slant of the media, presence or absence of a grandparent, type of legislation, and treatment of one's own parents. These variables impart meaning to the research because they offer suggestions as to what accounts for variability in the perception of the elderly.

As an example of generating a research question using three primary variables, let's say that you have inferred that many women lose interest in sexual relations with their husbands after the birth of a child. At this level, the proposed study would consist of checking out this hunch by assessing the sexual interest of women (Variable 1) before and after childbirth (Variable 2). But what would this finding mean? The introduction of a third variable or construct could lead to a much more sophisticated and conceptually meaningful study. An investigator might ask, "I wonder if the husband's involvement in parenting makes a difference? What's the role of his sexual initiative? How about childbirth complications? Father's involvement in the birthing? The length of time they have been married? Time after delivery? Presence of other children in the home?" There is no end to the number of interesting questions that can be raised simply by introducing another variable into the proposed study. This variable would then help to explain the nature of the relationship between the primary variables. In fact, one could brainstorm a whole list of potential third variables that could contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between childbirth and sexuality.

Note that the precise function of the third, or connecting, variable depends on the logic of the conceptual model or theory underlying the study. In this regard, a distinction can be made between two terms, *mediator* and *moderator,* which have often been used interchangeably. A moderator variable pinpoints the conditions under which an independent variable exerts its effects on a dependent variable. Strictly speaking, a moderator effect is an interaction effect in which the influence of one variable depends upon the level of another variable (Frazier, Tix, & Barron, 2004). The most commonly employed moderator variable is undoubtedly gender. The relationship between provocation and aggression, for example, may be very different for men and women. The role of context can also be conceptualized as a moderator variable. The famous Kinsey report on sexual behavior would certainly have generated very different results if the interviews with participants about their sex lives had taken place in the presence of family members. Identification of relevant contextual variables has important implications for the design of a study because such variables will affect the generalizability of research findings.

A mediating variable, on the other hand, tries to describe how or why rather than when or for whom effects will occur by accounting for the relationship between the independent variable (the predictor) and the dependent variable (the criterion). The mediator is the mechanism through which the predictor affects the outcome (Baron & Kenny, 1986). In the health psychology field, social support can be regarded as either a moderating variable or a mediating variable (Quittner, Glueckauf, & Jackson, 1990). Conceptualized as a moderator, social support could be seen to exert beneficial effects on health outcomes only under conditions of high stress (i.e., there is a statistical interaction between stress and social support). Conceptualized as a mediator, social support acts as an intervening variable between stress and health outcomes (i.e., there is an indirect relationship between stress and illness). Arguing from this model, some stressful events might encourage traumatized individuals to shun or exhaust their supportive resources or perceive them as unhelpful, leading, in turn, to increased symptoms of anxiety and depression. The diagram in Figure 2.1 captures the distinction between moderating and mediating variables in a theoretical model. In the case of mediation, the mediating variable (social support) is placed between stress and health outcomes. In the case of moderation, the arrow from social support points to the arrow from stress to health outcomes, indicating that the relationship between stress and health depends on the level of social support. We have illustrated one potential outcome in a classification plot

at the bottom of Figure 2.1. Note that under conditions of low stress, there is no difference in health between the low and high social support groups; however, under conditions of high stress, those with high social support, while still illustrating some decrement in health status, fare much better

Social support mediates the relationship between stress and health outcomes.

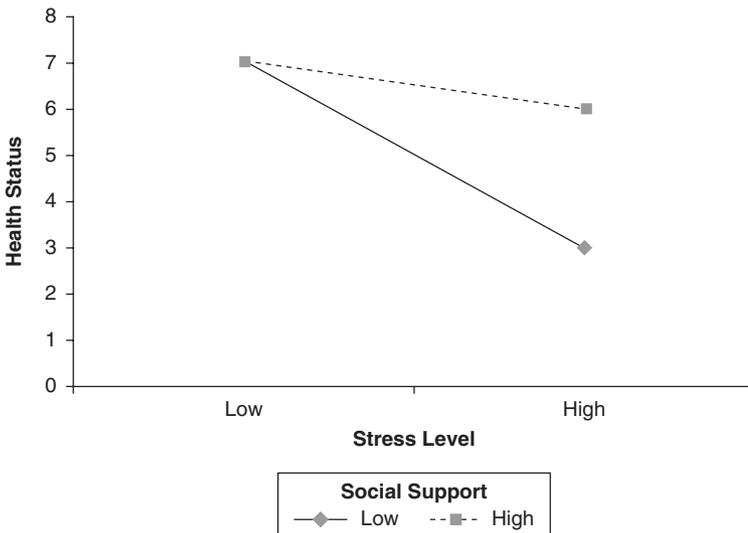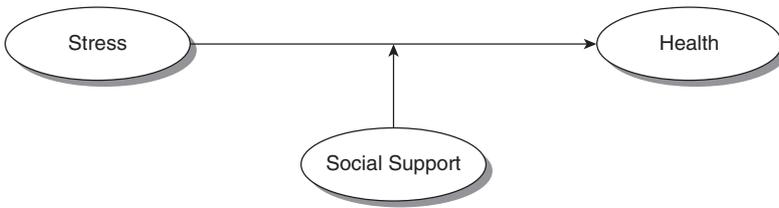Social support moderates the relationship between stress and health outcomes.

**Figure 2.1**    The distinction between moderator and mediator variables as represented in causal diagrams

than those with low social support. In other words, social support moderates the relationship between stress and health.

One single research study is not likely to establish and verify all of the important elements of a complex conceptual model. As one of our colleagues puts it, you would need a video camera to capture the entire Grand Canyon on film, whereas the dissertation is more like a snapshot, perhaps of a mule and rider descending one small section of the canyon trail. Yet the proposed model can provide a useful context for current and future research studies. Most ambitious research studies rely heavily on just such theoretical models. For example, Gerald Patterson (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989) spent many years developing and testing a model to explain aggressive and deviant behavior among young males. The model hypothesizes that such antisocial behavior can be causally linked to disrupted parental discipline and poor family management skills. The relationship between these two sets of variables is not direct but mediated by a network of other variables. The process is thought to begin with parents "training" a child to behave aggressively by relying on aversive behaviors in both punishment and negative reinforcement contingencies. The inability of the parents to control coercive exchanges among family members constitutes "training for fighting," which leads, in turn, to aggressive behavior and poor peer relationships. This lack of social skills generalizes to antisocial behavior in the classroom, which makes it next to impossible for the youth to obtain basic academic skills, thus preparing him poorly to cope with life outside school. Ultimately, this leads to high rates of delinquent behavior. An abbreviated summary of one version of the model is shown in Figure 2.2.

As you might imagine, a researcher is in no position to test the entire model in a single study. Indeed, Patterson and his colleagues (Patterson et al., 1989) spent many years testing and elaborating the nature of these relationships. A single study might focus on one particular set of relationships within this complex model. For instance, the investigator might ask whether there is a relationship between physical fighting and poor peer relationships. Each variable would have to be operationalized, probably by obtaining more than one measure of both fighting and peer relationships. In Patterson's work, for instance, he asks mothers, peers, and teachers to rate levels of physical fighting because their perspectives may differ. Likewise, peers, teachers, and self-reports are used to obtain measures of peer relations. The objective of the study—that is, attempting to determine the nature and form of the relationship between the primary variables—determines the research method that is employed.

**Early Childhood**          **Middle Childhood**          **Late Childhood
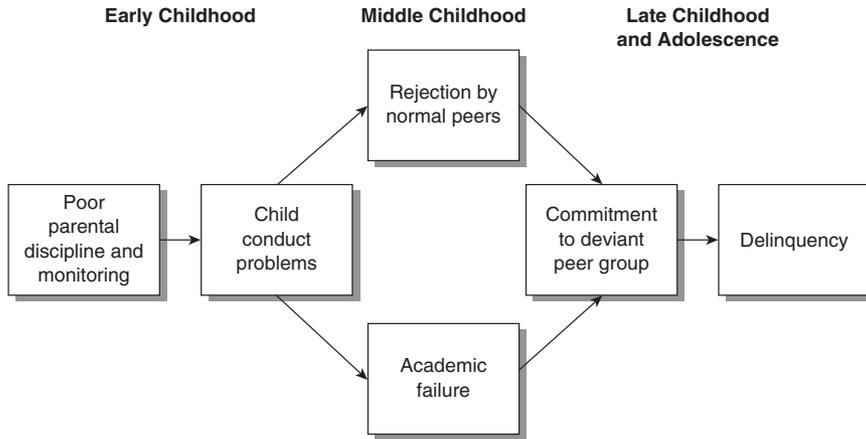                                                          and Adolescence**



**Figure 2.2**      A model of antisocial behavior

SOURCE: From Patterson, G. R., DeBaryshe, B. D., & Ramsey, E., "A developmental perspec-
tive on antisocial behavior," in *American Psychologist, 44.* Copyright © 1989, American
Psychological Association. Reprinted with permission.

A second example of using a comprehensive model as a guide to
research comes from Rudolf Moos's ongoing studies of work and family
environments (Schaefer & Moos, 1998). Basically, Moos adopted a socio-
ecological view of work. The model describes both environmental variables
and personal variables and relates them, via a set of cognitive functions
and coping variables, to individual adaptation, including morale, job per-
formance, and overall health and well-being (see Figure 2.3). A single
study might focus on a small set of environmental system variables and
relate them to something else, such as other environmental system vari-
ables, personal system variables, coping responses, or health outcomes. For
instance, the researcher might explore the contribution of work pressure
and supervisory support on innovation in the workplace.

A final example of a research model comes from the recent dissertation
of one of our students (MacNulty, 2004). This model was generated from
existing research literature and then tested empirically using a number
of well-validated self-report scales. The study employed the schema-
polarity model of psychological functioning to assess how self-schemas
(cognitive representations of self and others) influence the experience of
gratitude and forgiveness and whether these latter variables mediate the
relationships between self-schemas and physical health and well-being.
The model is summarized in Figure 2.4. The plus and minus signs refer
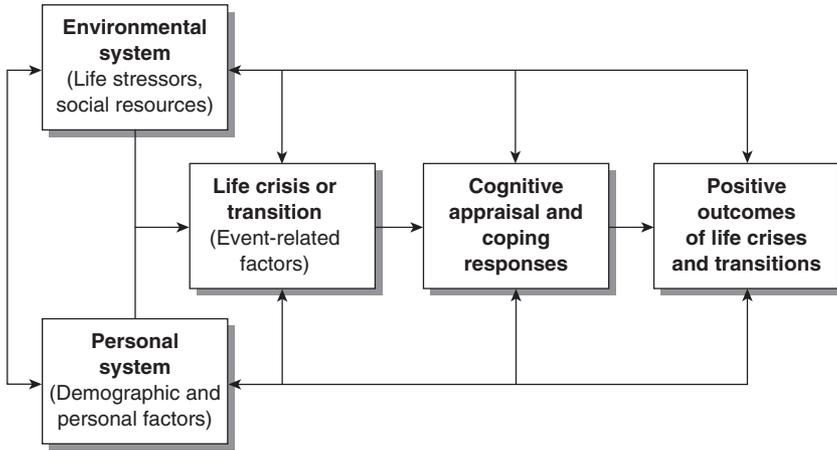to the direction of the hypothesized relationships among the variables.

**Figure 2.3**      A model of work stress and coping
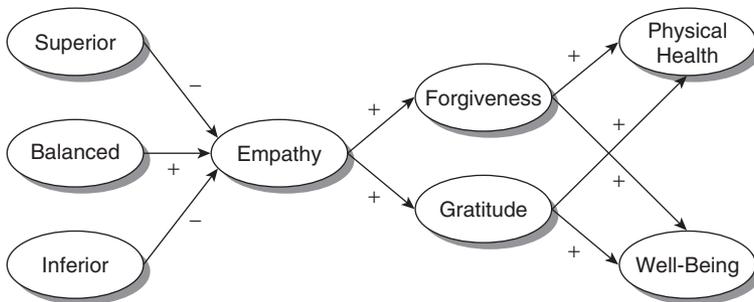
SOURCE: Moos (1985).

**Figure 2.4**      A theoretical framework presented as a causal diagram

SOURCE: From *Self-Schemas, Forgiveness, Gratitude, Physical Health, and Subjective Well-Being,* by W. MacNulty, 2004, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, CA. Copyright 2004 by W. MacNulty. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Although the results supported most of the initial hypotheses, the proposed model needed to be amended to accommodate the data. This is typical of the research enterprise, in which theories and conceptual models are continually tested and refined to serve as increasingly sophisticated representations of real-life phenomena.

Whether or not a particular dissertation is designed to test a theory or model derived from the research literature, we believe that the creation of a visual model, which shows how the network of relevant variables and constructs may be related to one another, can serve as a powerful research tool for guiding the study. Arranging your ideas spatially helps to organize your thinking, which in turn helps position your proposed study within a larger framework.

## Generating Researchable Questions

The exercise that we use to help students generate researchable questions from their interesting ideas is a brainstorming exercise that begins with labeling one or two variables and generating a second or third. Brainstorming consists of openly and noncritically listing all possible ideas in a given period of time. Later you can return to a more critical analysis of each idea and delete those that are uninteresting, not meaningful, or impractical. Ultimately, of course, it is contact with the literature that determines whether or not a research question is viable because the literature houses the tradition of scholarly inquiry that goes beyond the limits of your own knowledge.

We suggest that you do the brainstorming exercise in a small group so that the person receiving the consultation merely serves as a scribe to record the ideas thrown out by the other group members (see Table 2.1). After 5 or 10 minutes, move on to the next person's partially formed research topic. We generally use this exercise in groups of three or four so that group members can frequently shift groups and draw on the spontaneous reactions of a larger number of peers uncontaminated by prior ideas or a particular mindset. The exercise involves suspending critical thinking and allowing new ideas to percolate. It should especially suit divergent thinkers, who will find the demand to be expansive in their thinking exciting and creative. Convergent thinkers may experience the exercise as a bit overwhelming, but they will find fulfillment in other stages of the research process that demand compulsivity, care, and precision. Every chapter of a dissertation contains both divergent and convergent elements.

Note that not all decent research studies focus on three (or more) primary variables. Many studies look at the relationship between two variables or concepts, and a few descriptive studies make do with one variable or construct. This generally occurs in the early stages of research in an area when little is known about a topic. Some investigators are pathfinders in

**Table 2.1**      Brainstorming Exercise

Begin by defining one or two variables (or constructs) of interest. Then gener-
ate a list of additional variables (or constructs) that in some way amplify the
original variables or illuminate the relationship between them. The new vari-
ables you list may be either independent variables, dependent variables, mod-
erating variables, or even mediating variables in the research questions you
eventually select. After brainstorming this list, go back and eliminate those
variables that do not interest you or do not seem promising to pursue. Finally,
see if you can now define one or more research questions that speak to the rela-
tionship among the two or three variables (or constructs) you have specified.
Ultimately, each of these variables will need to be operationally defined as you
develop your research study.

Here are some examples of the results of this brainstorming exercise applied
to topics taken from different disciplines.

*Political Science*

Begin with an interest in citizen participation in city council meetings. List
variables or phenomena that might influence, be influenced by, or be related
to this variable. A sample research question is "What is the impact of citizen
participation in city council meetings on legislative decision making?"

| citizen participation | $\rightarrow$ | legislative decision making |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| independent variable | | dependent variable |

*Education*

Begin with an interest in single mothers on welfare who return to school.
List variables or phenomena that might influence, be influenced by, or be
related to this variable. A sample research question is "What is the effect of the
availability of child care on single mothers on welfare returning to school?"

| child care | $\rightarrow$ | return to school |
|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| independent variable | | dependent variable |

*Criminal Justice*

Begin with an interest in the relationship between neighborhood crime
watch programs and robbery rates. List variables that might influence or
amplify the relationship between these two variables. A sample research ques-
tion is "What is the effect of neighborhood crime watch programs, in both
urban and rural environments, on the rate of burglaries?"

crime watch programs                    $\rightarrow$                      rate of burglaries
                              urban/rural environments  $\nearrow$
independent variable          moderator variable                dependent variable

*(Continued)*

**Table 2.1** (Continued)

*Psychology*

   Begin with an interest in the relationship between physical attractiveness and self-esteem. List variables that might amplify or influence the relationship between these two variables. A sample research question is "What is the role of body image and physical attractiveness on self-esteem?" Another sample research question is "What is the role of body image in mediating the relationship between physical attractiveness and self-esteem?"



body image
independent variable                          self-esteem
physical attractiveness                    dependent variable
independent variable

OR

physical attractiveness    →    body image    →    self-esteem
  independent variable          mediating variable      dependent variables

terms of opening up new topics of research by trying to understand as much as possible about a phenomenon and generating more informed hypotheses for others to test in the future. Nevertheless, we believe that most students underestimate what is currently known about most topics and that the most interesting, practical, and theoretically meaningful studies are likely to consider the relationships among several variables.

   We conclude this chapter with the outline in Table 2.2, which asks you to look at the kinds of issues that need to be considered and responded to during the course of developing the research proposal. By and large, your dissertation committee will need to be convinced of three things to be comfortable with your proposal:

1. Is the question clear and researchable, and will the answer to the question extend knowledge in your field of study?

2. Have you located your question within a context of previous study that demonstrates that you have mastered and taken into consideration the relevant background literature?

3. Is the proposed method suitable for exploring your question?

**Table 2.2**        Outline of Issues for a Student Researcher to Complete in the
                     Development of the Research Proposal

*Review of the Literature*

   The classic, definitive, or most influential pieces of research in this area are:

   The journals that specialize in the kind of research in which I propose to
   engage are:

   The body(ies) of research to which I wish to add is (are):

   The experts in the field of my research are:

*Statement of the Problem*

   The intellectual problem(s) I may help solve through this research is (are):

   The moral, political, social, or practical problem(s) I may help alleviate
   through this research is (are):

*Method*

   The method I propose to use to answer my question, prove my point, or
   gain more detailed and substantive knowledge is:

   An alternative way to do it would be:

   Three important research studies that have been carried out using the
   method I propose are:

   The reason(s) this method is a good one for my question, proposition, or
   subject is (are):

   Possible weaknesses of this method are:

   The skills I will need to use this method are:

   Of these skills, I still need to acquire the following:

   I propose to acquire these skills by:

## Note

1.  A *construct* is a concept used for scientific purposes in building theories. Constructs (e.g., self-esteem), like concepts, are abstractions formed by generalizing from specific behaviors or manipulations. When constructs are operationalized in such a way that they can be "scored" to take on different numerical values, they are referred to as *variables.*

---

### BOX 2.1   Student Suggestions

Over the years our students have provided the most useful suggestions for completing a dissertation. Here are some of the suggestions they have offered to one another that pertain to the earliest stages of developing a dissertation. Other suggestions are noted at the appropriate places in subsequent chapters.

1.  Start an idea box, a file box to hold index cards or slips of paper where you can store good ideas for future reference. Alternatively, open a file on your computer for the same purpose. Use the idea box for noting books and articles to get from the library, good quotations, inspirations for future studies, half-baked notions that might be useful in the future, and so on.

2.  Think of your topic as a large jigsaw puzzle with a piece missing. That is what you want to research, to fill in the gap in your field. To discover which piece is missing, you must read as much of the literature as possible in your field.

3.  Before you begin, read several well-written dissertations recommended by your chairperson.

4.  As you progress through the dissertation process and your question shrinks in size due to the necessity of maintaining a manageable project for one person, don't lose heart. Even very small questions can serve much larger purposes.

5.  To keep the perspective of meaningfulness throughout, keep imagining an audience of individuals who would want to know the results of your work. Even if you can imagine only 25 people in the world who would care, keep that group alive in front of your eyes.