

Thinking About Your Research Topic

Student Jane wrote to the library with a series of questions about technology. In her query, she used the term technology to mean many things, discussed multiple aspects of technology, and failed to present a specific research question. Thus, the librarian was unable to direct her to any specific source which would be of use to her. In this response to her email, the librarian suggests several steps she can take to help her generate more specific questions, which will allow the librarian to direct her to appropriate resources.

Hi Jane,

You have raised many interesting and important questions here! It sounds like you have a genuine interest in the topic and are able to think about it from a variety of perspectives. Your biggest task at hand is not finding resources for your topics, but rather narrowing your ideas down to one more specific question. This is quite challenging at first, because all of the ideas seem so interrelated, but there are a few things we can try.

First, what do you mean by "technology"? You use it in several different places in your email and I think for several different ideas. Do you mean software technology? Internet technology? Digital camera technology? Email capability?

Second, are you writing a book report? An essay paper? Conducting an interview? How long does it have to be? What kinds of and how many references does it need to include? When is it due? This information will help us guide you to the appropriate resources.

Third, share your ideas with your instructor and/or colleagues in Blackboard. Perhaps they can help you determine which of your questions are more important than the others. They might also be able to take all of your ideas and narrow them down into one more focused research topic.

Fourth, (and this sometimes works for me), if your assignment is not due immediately, set it aside and don't actively think about it for a week or so. Then, come back in a week and reread your email to us. Perhaps the time off will allow you fresh eyes with which to attack the problem. Sometimes, a week later, all the ideas have had time to settle and one of them will really pop out at you.

Jane, the Virtual Library loves to help its students successfully identify and obtain research relevant to their courses of study. Sometimes, however, it requires a lot of sifting and sorting of information before we can get to the meat of the issue. Let us know if any of these suggestions are helpful. When you write back, we can provide even more information to help you on your way.