

Name: _____

Refining a Research Question¹

It is not unusual to have to further refine your research question. This usually happens after you've done some initial research and have a little more background knowledge about your subject. Refining your research question can be a very important aspect – if your research question is too broad, it will be difficult to cover the topic in your research paper. As well, if your research topic is too narrow, it will be difficult to find enough research material and write an adequately in-depth paper.

In essence, refining a research question requires you to ask yourself questions about your topic and what you want to know. For example, if you're doing a paper on early American history, you might ask yourself these types of questions:

*Exactly which time period do I want to research? Colonial or post-colonial? Do I want to study the history of America before European colonists arrived?

*Which geographical area do I want to study? Do I want to study a particular state or a particular region, like the south or Midwest?

*Do I want to study a particular event, such as the first time indentured servants were brought to the colonies? Or the hostilities between Native Americans and the European colonists? Or the fur trade along the Mississippi river?

After answering these types of questions I could create a refined topic. For example, I could take "early American history" and come up with this topic: "The impact of the French and Indian War on the interactions between the Iroquois and the Algonquin Indian tribes."

As the example illustrates, you can take a very broad topic (early American history) and narrow it down to a manageable size for a typical college-level research paper.

Directions: For the topic you've chosen, answer the following questions to narrow it to a final question or topic statement.

1. State your general topic:

2. What time period do you want to study?

3. Is there a particular geographic area you want to study?

4. Is there a particular type of material you want to use in your research? (For example, newspapers, diaries, original music, etc.)

¹ Based upon *An Educator's Guide to Information Literacy: What Every High School Senior Needs to Know*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007.

5. Is there a particular area of study you want to focus on? (For example, cultural or social aspects, political or every day history, etc.) Describe what you already know about this area of study:

6. State your final revised topic that includes aspects of questions 2 – 5: