

One of the big challenges when starting your research is choosing a topic that isn't too broad or too narrow. If it's too broad you'll get thousands of results covering every different aspect of your topic. If it is too narrow you may get few or no results at all.

Consider "Homelessness." On its own, homelessness as a topic is too broad. If you try searching for it as a keyword you'll get thousands of results covering many different disciplines and focusses. This is because homelessness in general is a global problem with a wide range of causes and effects – not something that you can do justice to in a term paper. The good news is that you don't have to completely abandon your topic – all it needs is a little focus. Some straightforward ways to find that focus include looking at a geographic region or a specific demographic, such as gender, age range, personal identity, or a cultural group. As an example, we could look at homelessness AND Vancouver.

Sometimes, adding only one qualifier isn't enough. 12,000 results is too many and a good indicator that your topic is still too broad. Really look through your results lists and if you're using Summon or another Library database, use the subject or discipline menu on the side to get a sense of where all this research is coming from. Analyzing your results will suggest additional angles to explore.

In this case you may be interested in the **causes or correlations** related to homelessness - so add keywords that represent one of these facets into your search, such as affordability or mental illness. Now your results list is a bit more manageable and you can limit your results further by selecting options in the discipline and subject menus as well as choosing particular content types.

So, now you know how to deal with a topic that's too broad – let's tackle the reverse. Imagine trying to study “the shopping habits of teenage girls in Surrey and Vancouver, B.C?”

In this case, the broad topic of “shopping habits” has been narrowed by age, gender, and two cities.

With this many qualifiers you may not find enough relevant scholarly research on the topic. To salvage the topic, you will have to broaden your focus by searching for fewer elements. Try just two focusses to start with to see if anything pops up that interests you. In this case, let's drop the specifics of place and gender and try: “shopping habits” AND teenagers. Look through the results to assess if your topic is too broad, too narrow or just right.

Ask yourself:

- Am I getting thousands of results? Or hardly any?
- Are there so many sub-topics and angles that my results list has no real focus?

If you decide that your topic is now too broad, add in another more element – perhaps gender, or a specific type of consumer product.

The trick with any kind of topic is to keep experimenting by adding or removing elements until you find a good selection of relevant resources. Don't be discouraged if your research feels more like a spiral than a linear set of steps – it is! Research is a complex process - so the next time you find yourself searching, scanning your results and then tweaking your search terms to do it all over again– remember you're in good company – that's what expert researchers do too!

For help with this process drop by, call, email, or chat online with us at the Library. If you'd like to learn more about getting started with your research check out our guide in the Research Help portal on the Library homepage.