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Finding the Gap:

Identifying a Good Thesis or Dissertation Topic

Overview

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

II. Criteria for Good Research Questions

I’m at the Thesis Stage **– I Need a Research Question!!**
I’m at the Dissertation Stage **– I Need a Research Question!!**

1. (Classwork) / **2. (Thesis Stage)**

1. (Classwork → Prelims/Qualifying Exams) / **2. (Dissertation Stage)**

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Use your whole graduate “career” to prepare for your Thesis/Dissertation

<u>Classwork</u> → Thesis Stage
<u>Classwork</u> → Prelims/Qualifying Exams → Dissertation Stage

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Filling Niches/Gaps

"Scholars have exhaustively studied the question of **why wars occur**, but most of this research has focused on inter-state war, that is, war between countries. Few, if any, studies have examined **why civil wars occur**."

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Facets (A Narrower, more Specialized focus on a broader topic)

e.g. Why do Wars Occur?

Why do Civil Wars occur?
Why do Civil Wars occur in Africa?
Why do Civil Wars occur in the Post-1960s Period?

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Extensions

Why do some people not vote? – Apathy
Too Busy
Peer Pressure

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Extensions

Why do some people not vote? – Apathy
Too Busy
Peer Pressure – Soc. Group
Family
Race/Ethnic

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Solving Puzzles/Problems

Survey Question: Do you agree with US foreign policy in the Middle East, or disagree?

Citizens → Government → Public Policy
(Opinions)

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Solving Puzzles/Problems

Survey Question: Do you agree with US foreign policy, or disagree?

Yes	x		x	Citizen x
No		x		x
	t1	**t2**	**t3**	**t4**

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Solving Puzzles/Problems

Survey Question: Do you agree with US foreign policy, or disagree?

Yes	x	y	x	y	Citizen x
No	y	x	y	x	Citizen y
	t1	**t2**	**t3**	**t4**	

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Solving Puzzles/Problems

Survey Question: Do you agree with US foreign policy, or disagree?

Citizens → Government → Public Policy
(Opinions)

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Mergers (Merging ideas/problems from different areas or subfields)

American Politics
Comparative Politics (Politics/Political Systems w/in Countries)
International Relations (Politics between Countries)
Political Philosophy

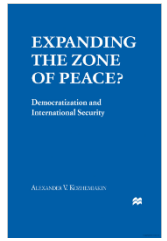
Mergers

American Politics

Comparative Politics (Many countries are “democratizing”) →

International Relations (“Democratic Peace” Demos don’t fight each other) →

Political Philosophy (War/Security)



EXPANDING THE ZONE OF PEACE?

Democratization and International Security

ALEXANDER V. KOZHEMIAKIN

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

“Mechanical/Structural Techniques”

Claude Shannon

As a student at MIT, at the humble age of 21, he published what many consider possibly the most important master’s thesis of the century.

Citation: Quartz website (https://qz.com) https://qz.com/1365059/a-universal-way-to-solve-problems-from-a-mathematical-genius/ Accessed 8/31/2018

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

"Mechanical/Structural Techniques"

[Shannon] isn't exactly a household name. But if it wasn't for his work, what we think of as the modern computer may not exist. His influence is enormous not just in computer science, but also in physics and engineering.

The word genius is thrown around casually, but there are very few people who actually deserve the moniker like Claude Shannon. He thought differently, and he thought playfully.

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

"Mechanical/Structural Techniques"

One of Shannon's go-to tricks was to restructure and contrast a problem in as many different ways as possible. This could mean exaggerating it, minimizing it, changing the words of how it is stated, reframing the angle from where it is looked at, and inverting it.

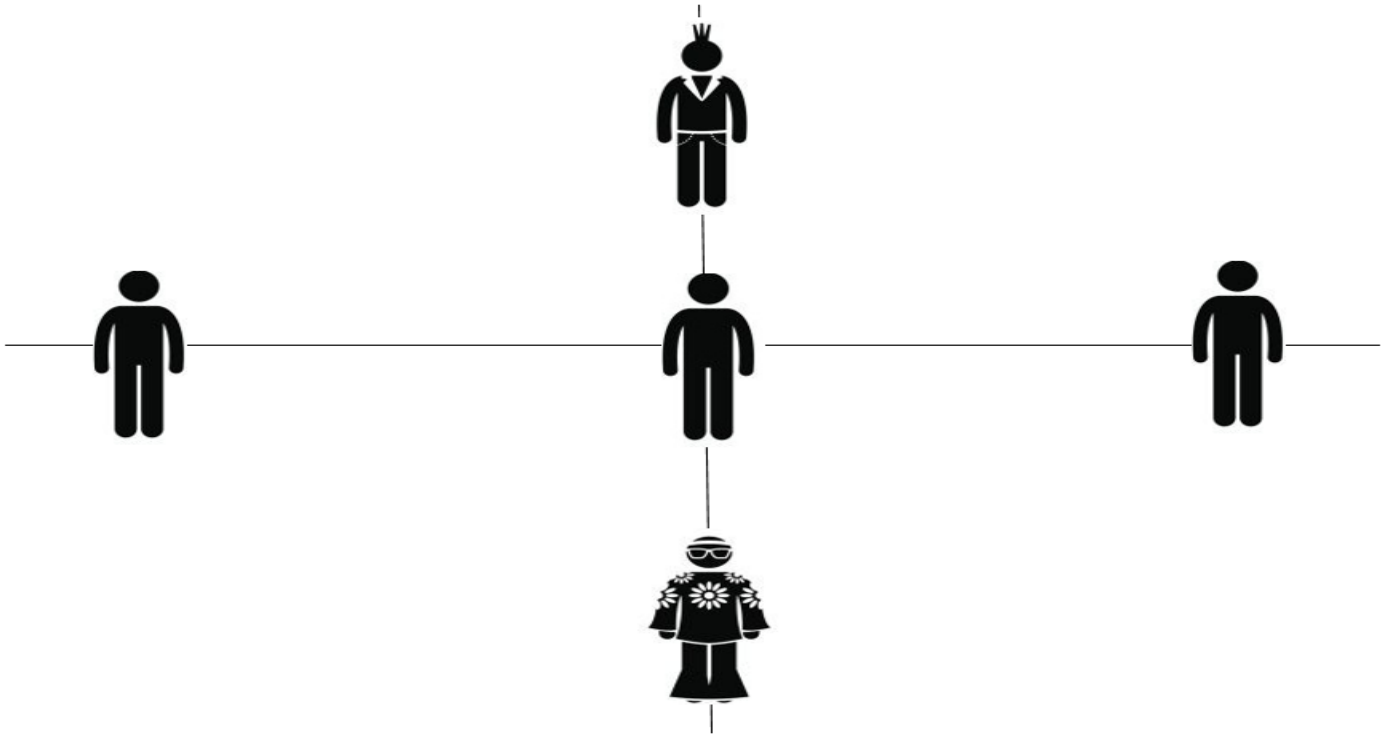
We could, for example, ask: What is the best way to solve this? But we could also ask: What is the worst way to solve this? Each contains knowledge, and we should dissect both.

Just as a problem has forms, it also has many shapes. Different shapes hold different truths.

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

“Mechanical/Structural Techniques”

Dimensions



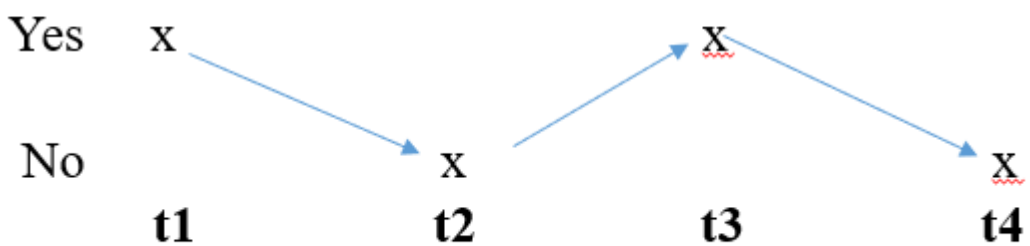
I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

“Mechanical/Structural Techniques”

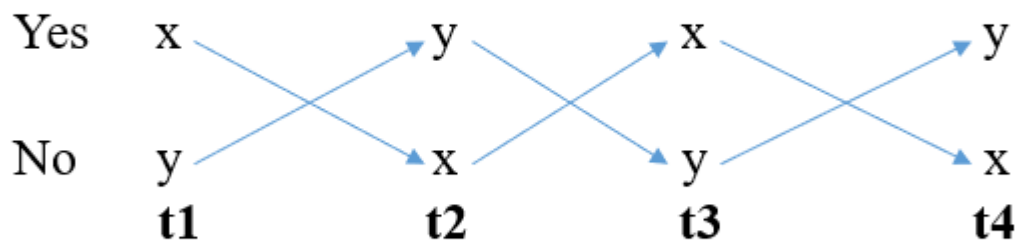
Levels of Analysis

- Macro
- Middle
- Micro

Individual Level

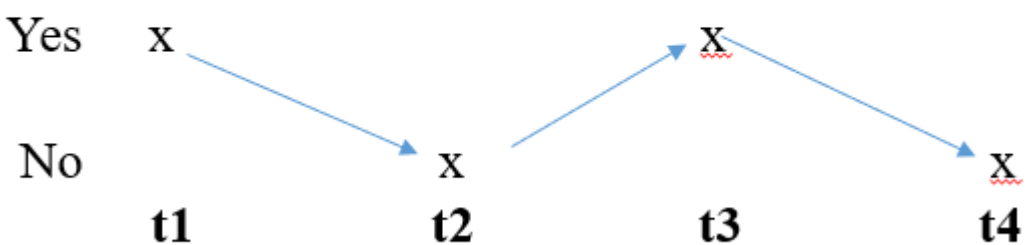


Aggregate Level



N = 2

Individual Level



N = 1

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

“Mechanical/Structural Techniques”

Levels of Analysis

Collective/Aggregate

Individual

I. Opportunities/Strategies for Finding Research Questions

Building on Work by Mentors/Advisers

Niches/Gaps
Facets
Extensions

II. Criteria for Good Research Questions

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Getting Done)

Interesting (to you)

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Getting Done)

Interesting (to you)
Feasible/Do-able

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Getting Done)

- Interesting (to you)
- Feasible/Do-able
  - Empirical/Measurable/Operationalizable
  - Materials/Data Available “Canned” vs Self-Collected

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Getting Done)

Interesting (to you)
Feasible/Do-able
    Empirical/Measurable
    Materials/Data Available “Canned” vs Self-Collected
Time

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Getting Done)

Interesting (to you)
Feasible/Do-able
    Empirical/Measurable
    Materials/Data Available “Canned” vs Self-Collected
Time
How Much Help is Available?

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Getting Done)

- Interesting (to you)
- Feasible/Do-able
  - Empirical/Measurable
  - Materials/Data Available “Canned” vs Self-Collected
- Time
- How Much Help is Available?
  - Adviser
  - Support Services
  - Amount of Previous Work on Topic

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Quality)

So What?

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Quality)

So What?
Novel/Counterfactual

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Quality)

So What?
Novel/Counterfactual
Relevance of Topic

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Quality)

So What?
Novel/Counterfactual
Relevance of Topic
Faddish vs Sustained

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Quality)

So What?
Novel/Counterfactual
Relevance of Topic
Faddish vs Sustained
Publication/Application Potential

Criteria for Good Research Questions (Quality)

So What?
Novel/Counterfactual
Relevance of Topic
Faddish vs Sustained
Publication/Application Potential
Richness/Potential for Continuing Work

Final Point:

Research Questions can be Overrated!

In ~~some~~ many cases, research can proceed productively with just a general sense of topic rather than a precise question.