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Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project That Matters to You (and the World)

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Book Review:

Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project That Matters to You (and the World)

by Thomas S. Mullaney and Christopher Rea
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Original research is essential in academic studies, especially at the graduate level. While students can take coursework specifically on research methodologies, additional resources, such as books on research writing, can be beneficial to students' work. However, most of these texts focus on how to do the research, not on helping students decide what to research. Mullaney and Rea's 2022 publication, *Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project that Matters to You (and the World)*, fills this gap, and should be an essential component of every student's journey through academic research. Written as both a guidebook and a workbook, this small-but-mighty resource shows students how they can start their path for research.

The book aims to hone students' ability to ask questions that lead to uncovering an underlying research problem from which a project can be formed. The book also serves as a workbook, with exercises and prompts for the reader to *try this now,* and to apply the learning in the chapters with their own research interests to ultimately generate a working draft of an actual research project. As a great complement to the reading and writing activities, each section of the book also includes commonly made mistakes that the authors highlight, so that readers/writers can avoid them in their own work. The authors also suggest finding a sounding board–a professor, a mentor, an advisor, or a colleague who acts as an outside eye, offering a different perspective or pointing out unconscious thinking or assumptions.

Building upon their combined years of experience working with many students at all levels, the authors present the book in two sections, each with three chapters. The first section focuses on the authors' guiding principle of becoming a self-centred researcher. Rather than speaking of ego, the authors explain that self-centered researchers are "self-reflexive and self-critical; honest and probing about their own interests, motivations, and abilities" (p. 5). The principle focuses on a practice of starting from where one is (internally and externally), an ethic of acknowledging one's skills and limitations, and a state of mind of self-awareness. The authors want readers to discover the purpose and passion behind their research and guide them through the discovery of what excites them (and equally importantly, what bores them) to ultimately come up with a research project that matters to them.

The chapters move from research topic to research problem, from developing research questions to thinking about said problems from various angles, to continually refining a problem and its questions into a strong research plan. Chapter one introduces us to the afore-mentioned guiding principle of self-centred research, as well as what differentiates topics and questions. Topics are not questions. The distinction between the two is well defined, with a walkthrough of how students can move from topic to question, can conduct initial database searches, and, more importantly, discover what brings us joy or excitement. We are encouraged to lean into our interests (and learn from boredom) to understand a direction that leads to a research question. The authors stress the qualities of what makes a good question: that it be precise and factual. They encourage asking many smaller questions, creating lists, and seeing how these add up and show threads. The chapter ends with suggestions of what not to do and what pitfalls students should avoid, such as the *Narrow-Down-Your-Topic-Trap* and getting stuck in *Topic Land* (p. 21). In Chapter two, we move from questions to problems. The authors have us improve upon the question(s) we developed in chapter 1, analyzing them to generate new and better questions that lead to an actual problem. The authors remind us that, "Only [we] can know whether or not the cluster of fascinating questions [we've] generated thus far add up to a problem, or just a highly sophisticated and interesting set of curiosities" (p.66). We are directed to databases and reminded how to research our problem using keywords, being mindful of the language we use and the at-time varied language used by authors in the literature (e.g., potentially different for historical texts and terms, spelling variations).

 Chapter three brings part one of the book to a close. Here Mullaney and Rea guide the reader through designing a project from the question(s) that were developed in chapter two. The cereal box challenge (p. 72) is used as an exercise throughout the chapter to teach about primary sources and what questions to ask when reviewing them. As digital as the modern world is, the authors remind us that not all information is available online. We should think like our problem: Where and at what would others have looked to find or leave information? In designing our project, it is important to remember that one source can have many aspects, and these aspects add up like dots to be connected. It is up to the researcher to determine which dots belong to the research problem and which do not. Ethics and the critical evaluation of sources is explored when connecting the dots. One tool the authors suggest, in this regard, is demonstrated in one of the *try this now* activities, which is the decision matrix, a table to plot out factors that impact the project, be it a positive or negative impact or a high, medium, or low impact. A refreshing piece in using this tool is that the authors recognize that researchers do more than research, and that research happens amidst other life events. Material factors, as the authors call them, should be considered in the decision matrix: time, funding, writing speed, family responsibilities, access, risk tolerance, abilities, human subjects, and personality.

Part two begins by having us consider whether the research problem, question, and project matters not only to the researcher, but to the world. Here, the authors encourage the reader to consider how others will see their research; to refine their questions by changing variables to understand how the problem can also become others' problem. Chapter four discusses finding a problem collective, a community of people, possibly with various backgrounds, who are interested in the same problem. By changing the variables of the research problem, the researcher can identify peers in other areas or fields that are a part of their problem collective. The *try this now* activity in the chapter suggests changing one variable from a list of elements of a research question to broaden the research problem and to find members of the problem collective. These variables include time, place, agent/subject, object, and hypothesis. Changing question variables helps the researcher find what sparks joy, as well as identify what they are willing to bend on, and what they are not. The authors demonstrate ways to rewrite the research and avoid "insider" language, allowing the problem to be applicable to more fields.

In chapter five, Mullaney and Rea caution against being drawn back into the Topic Land, first mentioned in part one, which is the trap of narrowing down the topic and not truly landing on a question. Chapter five also discusses navigating the field and peers' differing problems and interests. Here, a field is distinguished from the problem collective insomuch as a field is a "scope of activity or research targets," while a collective is "a shared intellectual agenda or array of concerns" (p. 152). The authors then guide the reader through the evaluation of sources and writing a literature review.

Aside from students, supervisors and advisors will also find the book helpful to read through. The book not only provides students with a walkthrough of the process of discovering their research topic, question, and ultimate project; also, it provides anecdotes that students can use to inform their conversations with their supervisors (and vice versa). This will undoubtedly help students avoid common mistakes and work through the process of defining their research with their supervisor or advisor in a succinct manner. *Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project that Matters to You (and the World)* provides critical and valuable information for students, supervisors, and advisors. Not all graduate students have undertaken original research, and therefore, do not know where to begin. What's more, students may continue research that has been handed to them, or be led down a path of research because someone else suggested it. This book helps students to discover a specific approach, and focus on original research that is meaningful to them and how to demonstrate that importance.

For all the great information offered in the book, there are a few points of criticism to balance this review. While the format of the book as both a guidebook and workbook is beneficial, having the exercises contained in dark boxes over multiple pages can prove to be challenging to read, causing some potential issues with the accessibility of the work. There are also questions about replicability in various areas of academia. Although the book seems well-suited for the humanities and social sciences, it is unclear whether the suggested approaches would be transferable to other areas, such as the sciences. Some of the advice in the book, such as Navigating Your Field, seems relevant to all academic areas, but it is unclear which other parts of the book would be just as applicable to all academic areas.

Author Bio

Scott R. Cowan is an Information Services Librarian at the University of Windsor, Canada. He received his Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) from Western University and his Bachelor of Music Education and Bachelor of Education from the University of Saskatchewan.

Scott is also working on a PhD in Educational studies. His research has centred around teaching and learning within a library context; information and access needs of the LGBTQ2S+ community; and social justice issues within the classroom.

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Mullaney, T. S., & Rea, C. (2022). *Where research begins: Choosing a research project that matters to you (and the world)*. The University of Chicago Press.

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