

Passion and Strategy: Necessary Ingredients for Choosing a Thesis Topic

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One of the most valuable pieces of advice I have gleaned from my mentor over the past three years is the need to get “mileage” out of what I write. With this in mind, I’d like to offer up some advice to graduate students contemplating topics for their master’s theses. Since this undertaking may consume a year of your education, not to mention several credits of your master’s degree, my first piece of advice is to ask yourself, “What do I feel passionate about?” Once you are clear on your passion, you need to consider two very important factors: current research trends and applicability to the doctoral dissertation. Given that many of us in terminal master’s programs will go on to doctoral programs, carefully considering how your master’s thesis may extend into a dissertation can both get mileage out of your writing and develop a passion into a contribution to the field.

To identify the areas you feel passionate about, ask yourself, “What area of research causes me to lose track of time?” If you can readily answer this question, you’re on your way to choosing your thesis topic. If, on the other hand, the answer seems nebulous, try to approach it from the opposite angle. Lord (2004) advises, “If you find yourself resenting the time you spend on research, do yourself a favor. Get out!” While his advice is aimed at the doctoral student, it is no less valuable when contemplating the master’s thesis. You’ll be far more successful researching a topic you’re interested in.

Should you find yourself with “writer’s block” when trying to discover your research passion, don’t panic. Take a deep breath and focus on one step at a time. To begin with, look at the type of master’s program you are enrolled in — clinical, counseling, developmental, etc. This will give you a broad focus area. Next, talk to your academic advisor and other professors in your program. Find out what their theses topics were and how they focused their research. This should at least lead you in a general direction. Finally, take inspiration from your life experiences. Keep the idea of choosing a topic on your mind and take notice of possibilities in daily encounters and exposure. By reading professional journals and attending conferences in your field, you will gain insight into what professionals and your peers are working on. Sooner or later something will catch your attention and inspire you to take it one step further and, thus, a thesis topic is born.

Of course, passion is only one factor in choosing a thesis topic. Another necessary ingredient is strategy. Your advisor and committee are expecting your thesis to expand on the current research and seek answers to questions generated by previous findings (Tanner, 2002), so begin by outlining a few ideas that combine the current research with your inspiration to take it one step further. Peters (1997) advises the use of a calendar system that combines daily, weekly, monthly, and long term goals to keep you on track and focused on the big picture. While there are many other sources of advice on pacing yourself through the thesis timeline (more than any graduate student would have time to read), the calendar system is concise and efficient. Don’t forget to also keep a regular appointment schedule with your thesis advisor and a log of your progress to streamline the meetings. By staying aware of your timeline you can take the stress out of deadlines and focus on developing your ideas.

Finally, getting back to my mentor's advice to get mileage out of what you write, remember to always keep in the back of your mind that you may one day be working on a doctoral dissertation. This can be the final factor in narrowing your quest for a master's thesis topic. Peters (1997) advises that the thesis, although not always a requirement, will help you with the admissions committee, assist you in learning how to conduct and write your research, and may satisfy a prerequisite for a doctoral degree. Plus, if you can complete your thesis research in an area you feel passionate about, that is relevant to current research trends, and that lends itself to expansion in the event of a dissertation, you will not only facilitate the completion of your master's degree, you may actually enjoy the journey.

References

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