Getting Ideas for a Study

Why is this Important?

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As a student, one of the most maddening things is when a professor says to write a paper and leaves you clueless for topic matter. When you talk to the professor, he or she will probably say: "Do something interesting from the book or apply the principles to everyday life".

This predicament can be terrifying when you are in graduate school and you have to do your thesis. Many folks are paralyzed and can’t come up with an original idea. They freeze and might even drop out without appropriate mentoring and guidance.

It might get worse, if you decide to become a professor - you will have to publish articles. Your chair will yell at you if you don't write. Nevertheless, you don't have a clue what to do!

So, how to you get ideas for studies?

The Crucial Big Idea

Observe the World through the Eyes of the Curious and With Knowledge of Your Discipline!

If you are not curious, don't bother to be a researcher.

Scientific curiosity is the most important attribute you can have. All the other things, we will discuss are just techniques.

So that's the speech but it's the place to start. Let's be more precise. There are three major ways to get research ideas:
Observation

This is any easy one. Just look at world and notice interesting coincidences or phenomena. For example, look at the topic called the "Weapon Focus" effect. The idea is that after a crime, the witnesses can't report what the criminal looks like - they were all looking at the gun or knife. Someone had to notice this and say, "Hmm - let's do a study to see if this is a reliable effect!"

Experts

You can get expert opinion - ask your professor. If you are a graduate student or a new professor - ask your mentor. If you are an old seasoned professor - ask colleagues.

Informal networking is a powerful way to find ideas and bounce them off others.

There are several ways to do in a more formal fashion

Use the Internet:

There are newsgroups and mailing lists for people in the social science disciplines. There are ones for eating disorders, color vision, forensic psychology and many more topics. Books and website can lead you to them. For example, check out http://www.healthy-resources.com for Internet resources.

Conventions - specialized ones for each discipline.

There is nothing like a major convention to get your intellectual juices flowing. Seeing other students, hearing research presented and meeting prominent members of the discipline can generate too many ideas, sometimes! Conventions are organized by learned professional societies. For a good reference to those in Psychology - check out [http://psych.hanover.edu/Krantz/psv.html](http://psych.hanover.edu/Krantz/psv.html) Psychological Societies.

What conventions should you go to?

Regionals:

As a beginning student, you might want to attend a regional conference like the Western Psychological Association, Southwestern Psychological Association, Midwestern Psychological Association, Rocky Mountain Psychological Association or Eastern Psychological Association. These have lots of students and student papers.

Majors:
Another possibility is the major annual meetings for all of Psychology. Check out:

- **American Psychological Society** at: [http://www.psychologicalscience.org/conventions.htm](http://www.psychologicalscience.org/conventions.htm)

**Specialized Conferences:**

As you become more advanced, you might want to attend a conference that is specialized in a specific area. In fact, many psychologists just go to these rather than the general ones. Some are as large or even larger than the general conferences.

Some suggestions are:

- **Association for Advancement of Behavior Therapy**: [http://www.aabt.org](http://www.aabt.org)
- **Psychonomic Society**: [http://www.psychonomic.com](http://www.psychonomic.com)
- **Society for Research in Child Development**: [http://www.srcd.org](http://www.srcd.org)

There are many more.

**Search the Literature**

In the past, if you needed sources for a paper or for ideas, a professor would tell you to go look up your topic in Psychological Abstracts. Your library might still have the older bound volumes around. Psych Abstracts (as it was called) was a monthly periodical that reproduced the abstracts (short summaries) from journal articles. At the end of the year - a topical index was published that gave a number for each abstract. It was hellish to use.

Today there are options that are more modern.

*Psych Info*
You are lucky today as the American Psychological Association produces a Web searchable database called *Psych Info*. It is searchable by author and keyword combination. It is a joy to use compared to the old Psychological Abstracts. Most University libraries provide access to it and usually give classes in its use.

**Info on Psych Abstracts and Psych Info can be found at**
http://www.apa.org/psycinfo

With over one million records, PsycINFO indexes the academic, research, & practice literature in psychology from over 45 countries in more than 30 languages. Includes relevant materials from related disciplines such as medicine, psychiatry, education, social work, law, criminology, social science & organizational behavior. Covers 1967-present & is updated monthly.

The way Psych Info works is for you to enter a topic and it will return the number of articles on that topic and then enable to you read the abstracts. In the following graphic, I entered "Weapon focus."

Note that Psych Info is going to search from 1984 on and look for the words anywhere. You can also search for specific authors - quite a useful feature.

Here is the result I received after telling the program to search for me. Note that there are nine results that match the term. If I click on the term, then the nine abstracts will appear on my screen.

**Other Strategies and Sources**

Let me suggest some other strategies. Sometimes with Psych Info, you can get swamped with too many articles. How can you avoid this?

**Read a review article on your topic**

There are specialized journals that just produce summary reviews of topics. You might check these out in your library. Sometimes, they have cumulative
indices at the end of a volume year. It's easy to browse them. Here are the most well-known review sources:

*Psychological Bulletin & Psychology Review*

*Behavioral and Brain Sciences & Annual Review of Psychology*  
http://www.annurev.org/

**Search for Articles that Cite a Specific Author**

Let's say you find an author that peaks your interest. It makes sense that articles that cite this author may be of interest to you. Luckily, a firm called [The Institute for Scientific Information](http://www.isinet.com/) produces the *Social Sciences Citation Index*. It is a print or searchable database that enables you enter an author's name and then come up with article that reference your target author's work. These have a high probability of being useful.

**Bottom Line:**

*Observe the World and then:*

- *Talk to Colleagues and Mentors*
- *Go to Conventions*
- *Search the Literature*

*Do these things and you won't lack for ideas!*