

Workshop Title: Defining the Scope of a Research Question

Summary: Students will take broad research topics and examine the wide variety of results and then work on narrowing the topic. Students will then be given a very narrow topic and work on how to expand their topic and discuss their strategies.

Locations: Activity can be done in the classroom or at the library

Term: Fall

Specific Knowledge Outcomes:

- Students will explore strategies for too many or too few results when conducting research.

Activity: Students will be given a broad topic like “cyberbullying” (or ask for a suggested broad topic from the group.) Students will do a keyword search on the topic in a library database such as Ebsco Discovery Services or Academic Search Ultimate. Have students study the information the database provides about their overall results and what the information suggests about more specific directions the research may take - for instance, “What do subject headings or titles suggest about the topic?” Discuss the results of their searches as a group, identifying potential approaches to focusing the topic. Be sure to point out subject headings and other relevant metadata. Using who, what, where, when, why, and how (question words) about the topic, identify other relevant keywords for narrowing the research topic. Have students conduct searches with the new narrow topic and compare their results with the previous search.

Students will then participate in the reverse activity. The group will be given a narrow topic, such as “How does gun violence affect attrition rates among teens in rural high schools?” or another topic provide by the group. Have students conduct searches in library databases. As a group, discuss their findings - what types of results? Did any strategies help find better resources? Finally discuss why the question was too narrow. Break down the question into its key concepts and discuss ways of broadening the topic using the previous question words. Create a new broader research question from the student responses. Have the students conduct a new search in the same database, and compare their results with their initial narrow search.