



Picking a Topic and Developing a Research Question in Geography and Environmental Studies

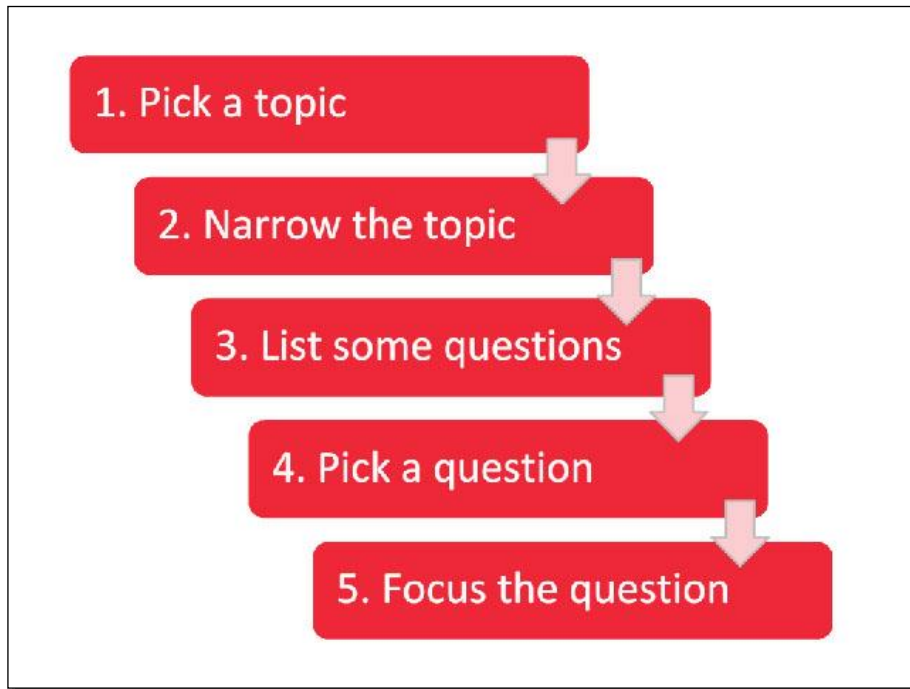
Start



To develop a research
question, follow
these five steps:

If you've watched our introductory video on Developing a Research Question, you'll know that to create a research question we suggest you follow five basic steps:

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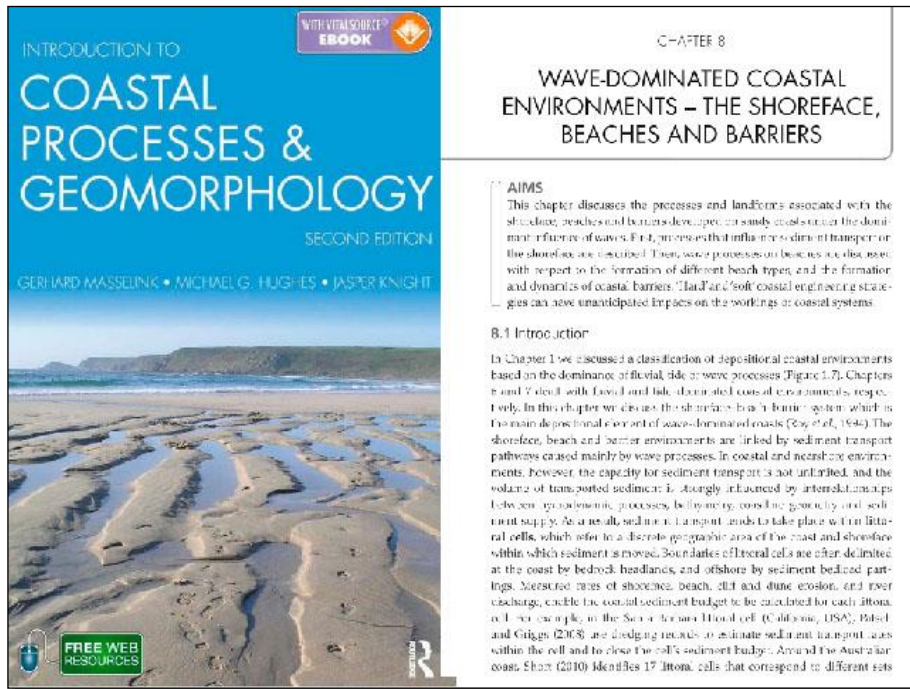


One, pick a topic; two, narrow the topic; three, list some questions; four, pick a question; and five, focus the question. You may wonder, "how does this work in practice?"



To answer this, we'll follow the case of Jill, a Geography student, who used this method to pick a topic and develop a question for her research paper.

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Recently, Jill took the Coastal Processes and Landforms course. The course had a research paper assignment. Jill knew after reading the chapter in her textbook that covered beach environments that she wanted to write her paper on this topic

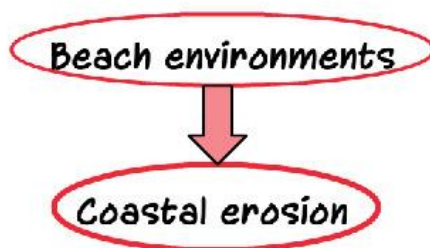


That's because Jill loves the beach.



Jill is from Fort Erie, Ontario. All her life, Jill has loved going to the beaches in the area, like Crystal Beach, Waverly Beach, and Pleasant Beach, and she was very interested in these specific beach environments.

1. Pick a topic



She knew that her initial topic was too broad, so she decided to narrow it by looking at one issue mentioned in her text, coastal erosion.

2. Narrow the topic

Coastal erosion

But that topic was still very broad, so the next step in Jill's approach was to narrow the topic further. To do this, Jill started to write out some different aspects of the topic.

2. Narrow the topic

Processes that lead to

- supply of sand
- sea level rise
- human causes
- storm action

Coastal erosion

From her textbook, she listed out some processes that lead to coastal erosion, such as supply of sand, and sea level rise.

2. Narrow the topic

Processes that lead to

- supply of sand
- sea level rise
- human causes
- storm action

Coastal erosion

Prevention of

- seawall
- tidal barrier
- groyne
- beach nourishment
- dredging
- breakwater

She listed some methods that are applied to prevent erosion, such as seawalls and tidal barriers...

2. Narrow the topic

Processes that lead to

- supply of sand
- sea level rise
- human causes
- storm action

Coastal erosion

Management of

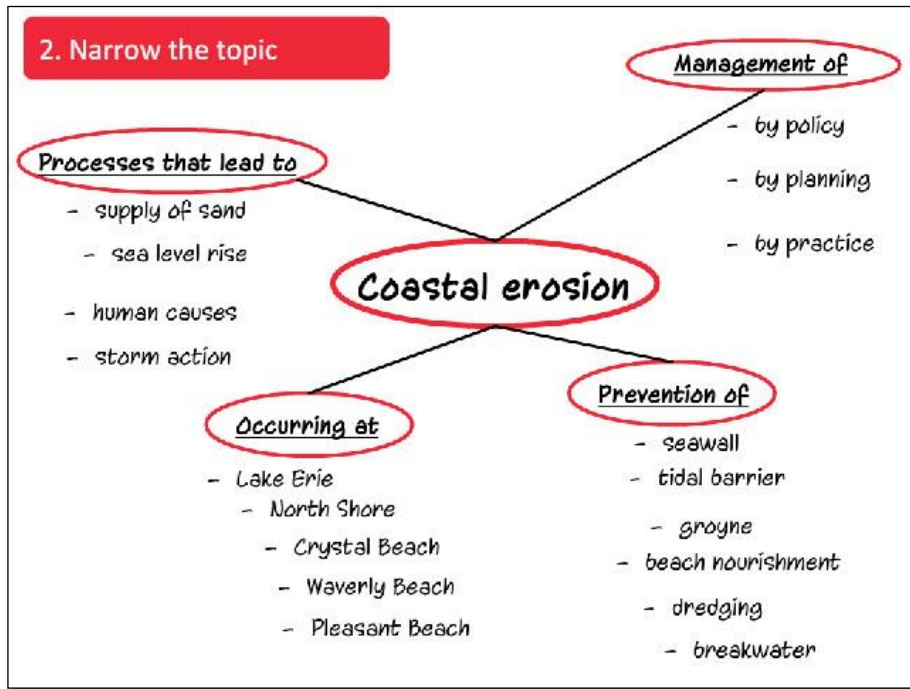
- by policy
- by planning
- by practice

Prevention of

- seawall
- tidal barrier
- groyne
- beach nourishment
- dredging
- breakwater

...and she listed some management strategies that have been implemented to deal with erosion, such as policies or planning.

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Another way Jill narrowed the topic was by adding a specific geographical component - the north shore of Lake Erie near Fort Erie.

3. List some questions

What morphological changes are occurring on the Lake Erie coastline?

How have fluctuating water levels in Lake Erie impacted coastal zone processes in the Fort Erie area?

What coastal management strategies have been developed for the beaches around Fort Erie?

Then, Jill listed out some questions on these aspects, such as: What morphological changes are occurring on the Lake Erie coastline and what coastal management strategies have been developed for the beaches around Fort Erie? Jill decided to focus on the management of coastal erosion in the Fort Erie area.

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INTRODUCTION TO COASTAL PROCESSES & GEOMORPHOLOGY

coast depends more on socioeconomic and political factors than on physical factors. For example, Tol *et al.* (2008) examine the adaptive capacity of different European countries to sea-level rise. They argue that, irrespective of coastline type, policy responses vary considerably between countries, which means that the impacts of future sea-level rise will be more strongly determined by coastal management policy rather than coastal processes and geomorphology.

12.4.4 Coastal management policy for the twenty-first century

Coastal management covers three broad areas (Carter, 1988):

- Policy relates to the political and administrative framework through which coastal management is regulated, principally through legislation and education.
- Planning is the process of allocation of environmental, ecological, social or economic resources. Planning may be negative in that it discourages development, or positive in that it encourages it.
- Practice covers the techniques needed for implementation of planning decisions, or for undertaking restorative or remedial works. Practices range from building coastal protection structures to planting marram grass.

The three areas are closely related, and developments in one area tend to inform developments in the other two.

In the past, coastal management was often concerned with single issues that could be dealt with by a single authority. This is no longer the case due to increased complexity of coastal management issues and the spatial and temporal scales at which they operate. **Integrated coastal management** (ICM) refers to the management approach that considers the range of scientific and human

As Jill continued to read in her textbook, she came across a discussion of the integrated coastal management approach, a relatively recent approach to coastal zone management that takes into account a fuller range of factors and issues affecting a stretch of coastline.

In the past, coastal management was often concerned with single issues that could be dealt with by a single authority. This is no longer the case due to increased complexity of coastal management issues and the spatial and temporal scales at which they operate. **Integrated coastal management** (ICM) refers to the management approach that considers the range of scientific and human issues affecting a coastal stretch, different coastal users (including administrative authorities, environmental organisations, industry and other interest groups), available legislation, engineering and expertise, and which effectively integrates policy, planning and practice. As such, ICM is a dynamic process in which a coordinated strategy is developed and implemented for the allocation of resources to achieve the conservation and sustainable use of the coastal zone. Geographically,

She decided to include the integrated coastal management approach into her research topic.

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Once Jill had some preliminary questions, she began to conduct some initial research using one of the library's research databases - GeoBase. She used GeoBase because she knew it would help her find peer-reviewed research articles, and that it focused specifically on geography and environmental studies research.

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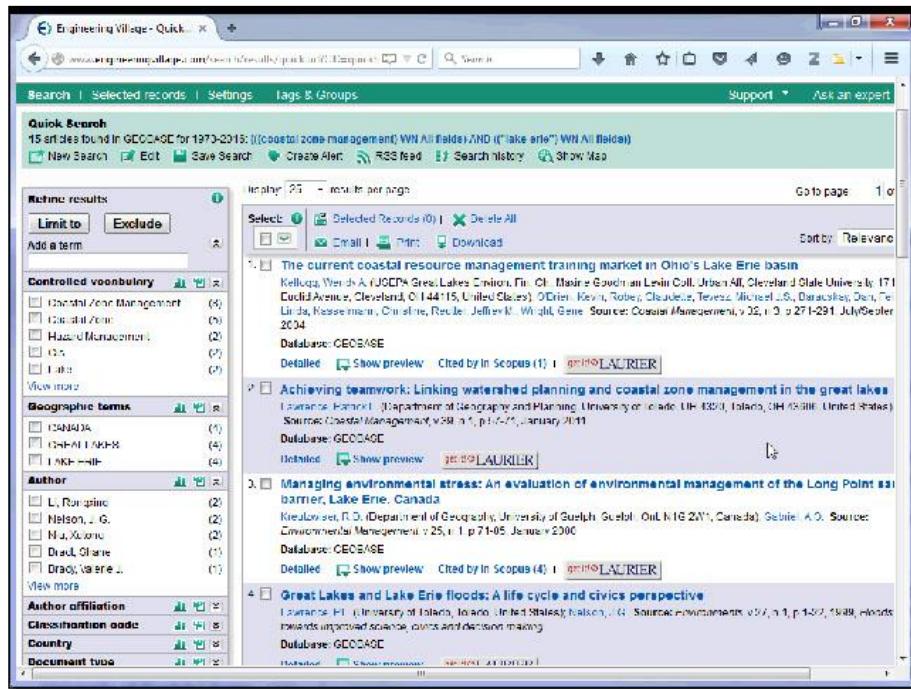
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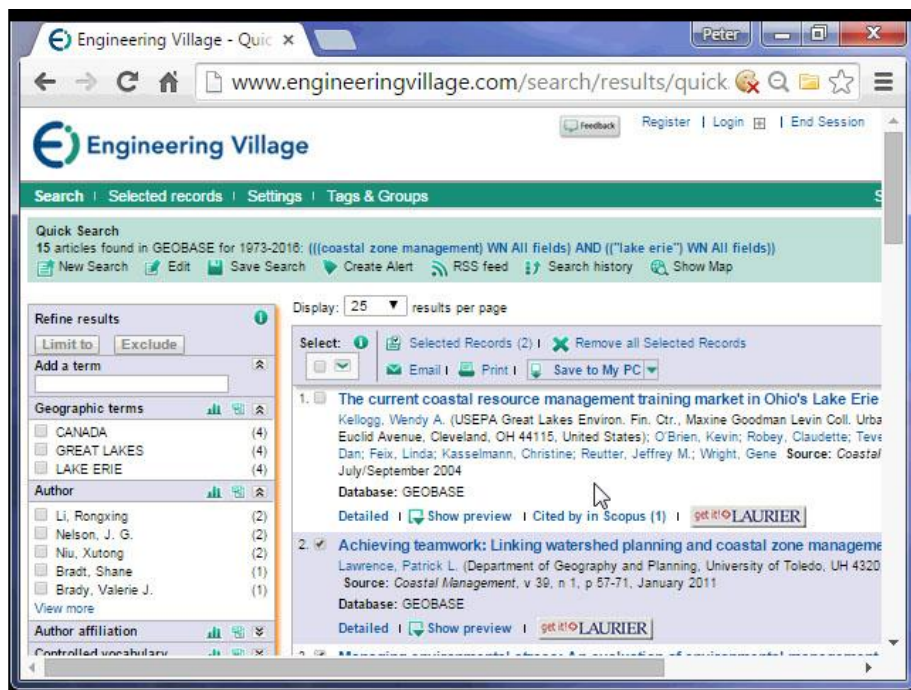
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She used the keywords "coastal zone management" and "Lake Erie" to get an idea of how much scholarly research has been done on this topic.

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She found a number of articles that seemed relevant and read their abstracts and conclusions.



Jill downloaded and saved the citations of these papers so that she could later indicate where she got her ideas from when formulating her research question and thesis statement.

that all needed management elements are incorporated into final watershed plans within the coastal zone of Lake Erie in Ohio.

Similar issues occur within the Long Point region of Lake Erie in Ontario, Canada. Although several planning arrangements are in place—with a watershed plan, shoreline management plan, and regional land use plan—coordination and a focus effort on the Lake Erie coast is lacking. Efforts need to be taken in order to bring together the variety of agencies and responsible bodies to develop a more effective and coordinated approach so that watershed and coastal planning can be seen as a single, more unified, comprehensive system for decision-making. Such progress as exhibited in Ohio, and called for in Ontario, can only advance the efforts within the Great Lakes basin to ensure that the intended aims of both watershed and coastal planning can be met through achieving a strong team approach in order to meet the challenges and opportunities facing a society placing such increasing importance to the wise use and sustained management of these critical environments.

Some of these preliminary findings even indicated to her the direction her own research might take.

Jill's research question:

"What integrated coastal management principles have been implemented along the Lake Erie North shore to manage coastal erosion?"

At this point, Jill was able to formulate her research question as: "What integrated coastal management principles have been implemented along the Lake Erie North Shore to manage coastal erosion?"

Jill's thesis statement:

"Integrated coastal management principles have not been implemented in the Lake Erie North Shore region due to lack of coordination between various levels of government responsible for shoreline management, watershed planning, and land use planning."

Using some of the research she already found, Jill was also able to turn this question into a thesis statement.

Her thesis basically stated that: "Integrated coastal management principles have not been implemented in the Lake Erie North Shore region due to lack of coordination between various levels of government."

Jill was then able to proceed with a more comprehensive literature review, and undertake the rest of her research.

Questions?



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