

Focussing your Thesis Topic:

- 1) **PASSION & PURPOSE:** Choose a topic you're interested in, not just one that others think is important. You may, for example, think immigration issues are important, and that the immigration process is different for different groups of people. You may also have some direct experience of this topic to draw on. Now immigration is a pretty big area so find some specific issues or questions that really gets the hamsters in your head running on their wheels.
- 2) **MAXIMIZING THE ACADEMY:** As a graduate student you have an opportunity, probably not to be repeated in many other places, to focus on and investigate an issue for an extended period of time. Academic research is problem solving of a very particular kind. It requires that you to theorize, locate your study in a larger field of academic inquiry, build a careful argument to support your claims and to do all of this in a public way (e.g. your ideas, proposals, and theses/papers will be carefully reviewed by other academics) so find a topic and some questions that can be well served through academic investigation.
- 3) **DIALOGUE:** Talk to people about your topic. Talk to other students, to your family, your buddies on your ball team (before they learn that one must *never* ask a grad student what they're research topic is—'cause we'll tell them!). Talk to your pro-tem and your other professors. It is in these conversations that you may hear, from others or yourself, some ideas that will help you hone in on your topic. Talk to yourself and tape record your ideas; for some, that's an easier first step.
- 4) **WRITE:** Keep a research ideas journal. Write down what you already know about a topic, especially if you've had some direct experience. Write down the questions that come to you – otherwise you'll lose some of them. Try writing ten questions or ideas about your topic a day. It can be more, of course.
- 5) **READ.** You can pretty much bet that whatever your idea is, it was also someone else's. But they didn't have your life. Identify both where your thinking overlaps with that of others', and where there are gaps in the research you can find.