

# Book Review: Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project that Matters to You (and the World) by Thomas S. Mullaney and Christopher Rea

*In Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project that Matters to You (and the World), Thomas S. Mullaney and Christopher Rea offer a new guide to deciding on your research topic and formulating your research questions to develop a project that really matters. This easy-to-follow, innovative and empowering book may help to make the next search for research questions easier than expected, writes Jingying Wang.*

**Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project that Matters to You (and the World).** Thomas S. Mullaney and Christopher Rea. University of Chicago Press. 2022.



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Finding research questions is always daunting for graduate students and early career researchers. Numerous courses and books try to teach the best ways of conducting research, but most of us, including the most talented ones, are still constantly challenged

when it comes to choosing a meaningful research topic. Perhaps the problem is that while books and courses explain the research process in great detail, no one has ever told us how to find the research question before moving on to the process. How can we select a compelling topic to investigate? How can it then be developed into a research project that really matters? In other words, where should research begin?

[\*Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project that Matters to You \(and the World\)\*](#), written by Thomas S. Mullaney and Christopher Rea, offers an answer: start from exactly where you are right now.

This smart book advocates an innovative approach to dealing with the research topic and research questions. The aim of the book is not to give some general magic formula which applies to everyone (of course, that doesn't exist!), but to lead people to their own research by providing techniques and a mindset for introversion and extroversion processes, thus accelerating their search for meaningful research topics.

Based on their profound experience in teaching and reflecting on research, Mullaney and Rea develop a unique 'self-centred' approach, which emphasises the importance of looking inward and finding 'a fire that lights itself' (7). That is to say, research questions should matter, first and foremost, to the researcher rather than any external judge. The authors argue that only the researcher themselves knows what to research. Researchers should first reflect on their experiences, interests, priorities and assumptions before field-testing their ideas in the intellectual community. In order to find the research topics that truly matter, every researcher should start from themselves and be able to discover what matters to them.



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Empowering is no easy task, but Mullaney and Rea do an excellent job throughout the book. They break the scary task of beginning research into six chapters, each of them dealing with one specific step: look for research questions; find research problems; design the project; find the problem collective (researchers who may not be in the same field as you but who are interested in similar problems, 14); navigate the field; and begin writing.

The first three chapters form the introversion stage, where readers are guided through the process of aligning their motivations and values with their research. After moving from topics to questions, from questions to the provisional project idea, readers are encouraged to 'get over themselves' and make the most of the intellectual community in the following three chapters. While the first part of the book is about looking inside oneself and finding a research project that matters to the researcher, the second part turns to looking beyond oneself and getting research that matters to the world.

In each chapter, the book offers exercises and games ('Try This Now'), a list of mistakes that might occur ('Commonly Made Mistakes') and advice on seeking others' opinions ('Sounding Board'). These are efficient ways to put abstract ideas into tangible practice and let these practices inform the further development of ideas. By including a large variety of materials from which readers can pick up those they click with, the book is meant for everyone who attempts to embark on research regardless of their disciplinary background.

Let's look at the first chapter, which is an excellent example of the book's ingenious and unconventional style. This chapter, focusing on moving from topics to questions, starts with a brief anecdote about a discussion. A student came to say that he wanted to study Chinese feng shui. He offered a well-polished answer to explain why he was attracted to this topic. However, the conversation, filled with 'straight-A' vocabulary, was more like a performance. The professor kept asking, 'Why feng shui?', and finally the student started sharing his personal concerns. He talked about his mother being a rational and highly educated lawyer but also firmly believing in feng shui. This suddenly inspired new questions: what defines 'rational'? What does 'rational' mean? Why are feng shui and rationality considered incompatible? The student filled his notebook with ideas that could become good research questions.

The authors then list several research tips that echo this short anecdote, such as making yourself vulnerable and generating questions internally. Following this interesting example, these tips seem vivid and persuasive. But they don't stop there. The chapter also includes several 'Try This Now' activities which help readers to answer the question: 'why am I interested in this topic?' My favourite exercise is 'Let Boredom Be Your Guide', which, in essence, asks you to examine research items that bore you. Ask yourself: what does this make me think of? Why did this one not jump out at me? What questions come to mind for me when looking at it? While everyone repeats the idea that 'interest is the best teacher', this handy exercise reminds us that boredom could also be a good teacher.

Although the book offers a path to follow during the whole 'find your research question' process, there is no one definite way of using *Where Research Begins*. With much information provided, readers are allowed to explore their own way of applying the techniques to their research. They can either read through every part and finish all the

exercises or pick those that fascinate them and keep coming back to these. Whatever suits you is best. Nonetheless, one major takeaway from *Where Research Begins* is that no matter how brilliant books and courses can be, the researcher is always at the centre when conducting meaningful research. No one can tell you what research should be done and what questions should be asked, except yourself.

*Where Research Begins* cannot guarantee that its readers will be filled with new research ideas and miraculously discover unnoticed research gaps, but it does offer splendid ways of dealing with research. It is an easy-to-follow book; those troubled with finding research questions should take a look as its unconventional perspectives could make the next search for research questions much easier than expected.

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