In my experience, a research project begins with a cloud of ideas, questions, and/or inspiration. How does one shape that cloud into a solid strategy for gathering information and answering a question? Below are 9 steps for getting started: In real life, they overlap each other in time and space.

**Step 1. Get Curious.** Ask questions, consider clinical conundrums, follow a general interest, indulge in inspiration, or attach yourself to someone doing interesting work.

**Step 2. Identify an Interest.** Maybe it’s an experience you had (witnessing your uncle’s illness) or a passion (wilderness medicine), or something curious (why did patient A react to our treatment that way?)

**Step 3. Be Patient.** It may take awhile for the idea-cloud to stop swirling and take shape. Also, be patient with research processes: IRB applications, grant reviews, journal editors are not fast.

**Step 4. Find a Mentor.** Maybe you can figure this out on your own, but … IT. IS. SO. MUCH. HARDER! Ask someone more senior to guide you. Offer to help them with their work. Learn from them, then apply these lessons to your own research questions.

**Step 5. READ!**

*Reading and Finding a Mentor* are the 2 most important things you can do!

*Why read?* All research is built on the shoulders of previous researchers. Read research papers in your area of interest. *Read A LOT!* Know your topic well.

*Why read?* When you write about research, you must cite other researchers’ work. You must know the literature.

*Why read?* Other researchers may have methods or measurements that you can borrow. Pay attention to how they write about their rationale and methods.

Befriend your librarian!

**Step 6. Find a Focus.** Focusing in one area helps to keep your project manageable and to establish your expertise for future work. The focus does not have to be a disease; it could be QI, health services, a research methodology or a population.

**Step 7. Start Small.** Successful researchers start with small pilot studies, then use those findings to justify going bigger. Start with unfunded work, then apply for a small local grant, say $500-$5000, to take it to the next level. Those findings can leverage a $50,000 or $100,000 project. Larger projects will pose new questions that lead to future work and more $$ support.

**Step 8. Don’t Sweat the Statistics.** Find people! Your mentor may guide you. Identify local resources for statistics. If not in your department, reach out to other departments or go to a research conference. Perhaps a graduate student can help you. Use your grant dollars to hire a statistician.

**Step 9. Plan a Project.** Consider these things:

A. From the literature: Why is this issue important? What is already known?

B. Write a clear Study Aim about the concepts you want to address.

C. Measurement: How will you define or measure these concepts?

D. Subjects: What are the inclusion and exclusion criteria for subjects?

E. Planning an intervention? Describe it.

F. Procedure: Who will gather data? How? When?

G. Data analysis. What statistics will you use? How will you know if you have met the study aim?

DO involve a statistically-minded person when planning in your project so they can assure that your data are statistics-friendly when you finish.

Alternatively, consider non-statistical research methods. Qualitative research is all about summarizing and making sense of words or text, rather than numbers. Data collection methods include interviews, observations, focus groups, studying documents, etc.

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