

SELECTING A TOPIC

Introduction

As you might imagine, this handout is primarily designed to help you write papers for your classes. Outside of school, you will have specific problems you need to solve and you can use information literacy skills to find the answers. In your classes, however, your professors will likely give you some guidance for choosing a topic, but usually it will be up to you to choose a specific topic that meets the criteria of the assignment.

Why is it important to choose a good topic?

Let's be honest. You want to choose a good topic to get a good grade. Choosing a topic that is interesting to you will help you write an interesting paper. If, for example, you choose a topic that relates to a possible future career, you might even learn something that will be useful outside of school. Of course, you want to choose a topic that helps you meet the requirements of the assignment.

Understanding your assignment

You don't want to put a lot of work into writing a paper and then get a bad grade because you didn't follow directions. Be sure you understand the assignment before you get started.

- Are there specific concepts to be covered or questions to be answered?
- Is the paper supposed to be informative or persuasive?
- Is there a required number or type of sources to be cited?
- Does the instructor have to approve your topic?
- How long is the paper supposed to be?
- And, of course, when is the paper due?

If you have questions about your assignment, don't hesitate to ask your instructor.

Selecting a topic

As mentioned earlier, choose a topic you are interested in and that meets the assignment's requirements. As you start coming up with ideas, do some preliminary research on them.

- Read broad overviews of your topic ideas in sources like encyclopedias or Wikipedia.
- See what resources the library has on the topics you're interested in.
- Talk to a librarian or your professor about your ideas.

Narrowing Your Topic

When selecting a topic, you will usually start with a broad topic and need to narrow it to something more manageable.

There are no hard and fast rules for determining how far to narrow a topic, but here are some things to consider:

- How long is your paper expected to be? Can you write a good 1000 word paper on the U.S. economy? Can you write a good 12-page paper about digital odometers?
- How many sources are you expected to use? If the assignment requires between 5 and 10 sources and you find over 100, you should probably narrow your topic some more.
- How popular is the topic you are considering? Others may have come up with the same topic you have and they may check out the resources you need before you can get to them.

Narrowing down your topic relies on common sense and experience. If you are still having trouble narrowing your topic to the right level, it can help to talk it through with someone else. Your instructor is always a good place to start, but you can also talk to the consultants at the University Writing Center and the Reference Staff at the Libraries for assistance.

Techniques for narrowing your topic

There are a number of methods for narrowing a topic to something workable for completing your assignment. Two techniques, or steps in the process of selecting a topic, are clustering and asking questions. See the Additional Resources after the quiz for more options.

Clustering

If you have a broad topic, clustering can help you find subtopics you can write about.

Here are the basic steps:

1. Select a broad topic.
2. Brainstorm subtopics related to the broad topic.
3. Select one of the subtopics.
4. Brainstorm the subtopic.
5. Select a sub-subtopic and do some preliminary research on it to see if it's a feasible subject for your assignment.
6. Repeat these steps as needed.

Example

1. (Choose a broad topic)
Global warming
(Brainstorm subtopics related to the broad topic. Don't worry about right or wrong. Just come up with ideas.)
 - 1.1. *Caused by decrease in pirate population*
 - 1.2. *Greenhouse gasses*
 - 1.3. *Natural planetary cycle*
 - 1.4. *Polar icecaps melting*
- 1.5. (Select one of the subtopics.)
Climate change
(Brainstorm ideas based on the subtopic.)
- 1.6. *Ice age*
 - 1.6.1. (Select one of the new ideas.)
Change in weather patterns
(Brainstorm some more to narrow the topic further.)
 - 1.6.1.1. (Select an idea that might be a good topic for your assignment.)
Hurricanes
 - 1.6.1.2. *El niño*

Asking questions

Asking questions about your topic can help narrow your focus. One method of questioning involves asking Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? Feel free to come up with other types of questions. They might provide you with the angle you need at which to approach your topic. In some cases, the questions might even help you develop the outline for your paper.

Here are some examples:

- What is a hurricane?

- Why do hurricanes form?
- When do hurricanes form?
- How does global warming affect the strength of hurricanes?
- How does global warming affect the number of hurricanes?

More Options for Narrowing Your Topic

Address your topic in a particular geographic area, such as a specific continent, region, country, state, city, etc. Example: AIDS in West Africa.

Address your topic in a particular time period, such as a specific era (e.g. the middle ages), a specific decade (e.g. the 1980s), a specific year, etc. Example: the hurricane season of 2005.

Address your topic from a particular view point. For example, you could look at your topic from a psychological perspective (e.g. addiction and marijuana), or legal perspective (e.g. legalization of marijuana), or medical perspective (e.g. medical benefits of marijuana), etc.

Address your topic based on a particular population type, such as male/female, nationality, age range, religion, etc. Example: pre-teen sports injuries.

Additional resources:

Choosing and Narrowing Topics from Colorado State University

<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/processes/topic/index.cfm>

Selecting a Topic from the University Writing Center-Texas A&M University

<http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/content/view/28/77/>

Writing a Research Paper from OWL-Purdue University

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/658/03/>

Choose the Best Search for Your Information Need

<http://www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/information/5locate/adviceengine.html>