



Choosing and Narrowing a Topic

The most important part of any writing assignment is choosing the topic, narrowing the topic, and developing it into a research question if necessary. With this resource and the help of a few of our other resources linked below, you should be able to easily choose, narrow, and develop a topic.

Choosing a Topic

When choosing a topic, it is important to follow these guidelines:

- **Choose a topic that is appropriate for the length you need to write.** Some ideas could go on for ten pages while others may only last a paragraph. Find an idea that suits the length of paper you need to write.
- **Find a topic that you can analyze or discuss rather than just summarize.** A paper should include analysis to show your learning and thoughts on the subject. Find an idea that you could develop, such as determining whether a character is good or bad, rather than a topic that would only allow summary, such as the life of the character.
- **Choose a topic that is interesting to you.** You should be intrigued by the topic so it is easier to write. If you have no attachment to the topic, it will become very difficult to continue writing about. Also, if you are interested in the topic, it will be easier to narrow it down.
- **Make sure there is research material available if you need it.** Some topics do not have a lot of research out there, such as modern pop culture works. Do a little bit of research while choosing your topic so you can determine whether it is a viable option. Also, make sure the research you find is credible. It should be peer-reviewed and from an established author. Check out this resource to help you evaluate the sources you find.
- **If a certain topic is not working, do not be afraid to change it.** It can be frustrating to have to change topics, but sometimes it is necessary. You can find a topic you really enjoy and then discover there is not enough research to write your paper. Or the topic may no longer fit the guidelines of the assignment. Therefore, some research should be done before beginning. Try out a topic that overlaps with the research you have already found so you are not forced to start over completely.

To help you choose a topic, here are some questions that can guide you:

- What is something that you cannot stop talking about?
- What types of books/magazines/blogs/articles do you enjoy reading?
- What are some topics you think would relate to this assignment?
- What is a topic that people should know about related to this assignment?

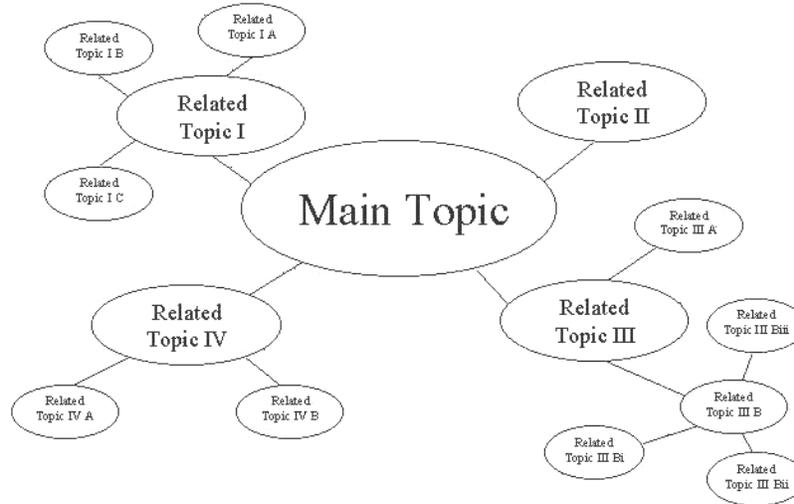
These questions can help guide you to what you are interested in. Sometimes, you are trapped in a subject area you may know nothing about due to the assignment. Doing a little bit of research before answering these questions may be helpful in that case. Once you have a topic, the next step is narrowing it down.

Narrowing a Topic

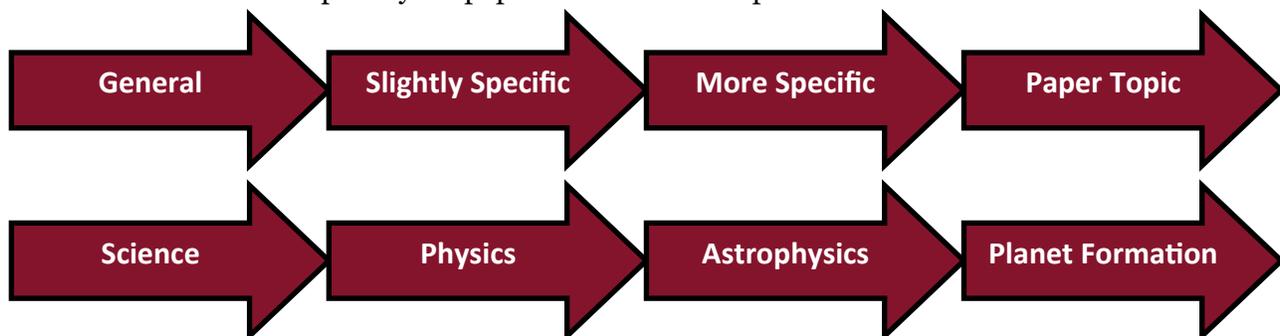
Once you have an idea for a topic, a more specific idea that can be written about and analyzed must be decided. A broad topic can result in too much research available (if it is a research paper), having conflicting ideas within the paper, or may be hard to manage. Therefore, you are now narrowing the topic. At the end of narrowing your topic, you should be able to build an idea statement. Some ideas for narrowing a topic are explained on the next page.



- **Brainstorming**—Create a brainstorming chart to find connecting ideas. The main idea should be in the center circle. Then, in circles attached to the main one, write down related ideas. You can explore those ideas through additional connections that can be the main points of the body paragraphs. Check out our resource about brainstorming to learn more about brainstorming.



- **General to Specific**—Create a flow chart that starts with the general idea and gradually becomes more specific. The most general topic you think of should go in the first arrow. You can increase the number of arrows from slightly specific to more specific as you continue to narrow down the topic. At the end of the flowchart should be the topic of your paper. Here's an example:



- **Lens**—Choose a “lens” to look at the topic through. The “lens” is the part of the big idea that you choose to dive into. For example, if you were looking at the cultures of South America, you could choose just one country’s culture to study.
- **Research**—Before choosing your specific topic, see what research is available. Look at the broad research first and find any repeating trends. Then research those specific trends until you find a specific idea that calls to you.

Once you have narrowed your topic, you should be able to fill in the blanks with this idea statement:

I am researching (topic) because I want to find out (issue/question) in order to (application).

The topic is the main idea that the entire paper is about. The issue or question is the part that you have decided to analyze. The application is the part that states why the audience should care. While this statement is similar to a thesis, it is not the thesis. It can be used, however, to build your thesis. A topic that is too broad is a paper about the entire 1990’s, but a topic that is too narrow is choosing January 15th, 1999. A good topic would be covering the main events of 1996.



Examples of Broad and Narrow Topics

Broad Topics

- Smoking
- Education
- Climate Change

To help narrow these topics, choose one of the strategies previously listed. For example, if you chose the “Lens” strategy for smoking, you could look at the attitudes towards smoking across different decades.

Narrow Topics

- Teaching Chinese in Elementary Schools
- The Life of Huskies in southern Florida
- Playing Rugby in Joliet, IL

These topics are too narrow and will likely not result in being able to find research. Some ways to broaden these topics is to ask additional questions. For example, if I chose the last topic of playing Rugby, I could ask “Where is rugby played?” and look into playing rugby in those areas.

Developing a Research Question

Here are some tips for transitioning your idea statement into a research question:

- Use exploratory question words such as “How” or “Why” at the beginning of your research question. Therefore, your question will be open-ended.
- Evaluate your research question. Is it clear? Is it focused? A research question should be clear and focused and require a complex response
- Hypothesize which side you want to follow and what arguments you will make.
- Make sure you have room to move with your research question. It should be neither too broad nor too narrow. Use your thesis statement as an answer to your research question. It should provide the answer you will be discussing within your paper.

Reminder!

- Remember to come back to your thesis to make sure it is in line with the research and writing you did. Sometimes a strong and clear thesis might not fit with where your paper ended up. Feel free to revisit your thesis to see if you have any new ideas about writing it.

Sources Consulted: CliffsNotes, Ayo the Writer, Purdue University, USC, KU, BYU, Indiana University, Suny Empire State College, GWU

Further Assistance: For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library or call 815-836-5427.