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## Writing@CSU Writing Guide

### Choosing and Refining Topics

When we are given a choice of topics to write on, or are asked to come up with our own topic ideas, we must always make choices that appeal to our own interests, curiosity, and current knowledge. If you decided to write an essay on the Affordable Care Act, for instance, you should make that decision because you are either interested in the issue, know something about it already, and/or would like to know more about it. However, because we rarely write solely for our own satisfaction, we must consider matters other than our own interests as we choose topics. You don't always have to say something completely new and novel, but you do need a topic you can be confident about supporting, arguing, and researching on. Both interest and expandability are key factors in such a topic.

### A Definition of a Topic

When we are given a choice of topics to write on, or are asked to come up with our own topic ideas, we must always make choices that appeal to our own interests, curiosity, and current knowledge. If you decided to write an essay on the Affordable Care Act, for instance, you should make that decision because you are either interested in the issue, know something about it already, and/or would like to know more about it. However, because we rarely write solely for our own satisfaction, we must consider matters other than our own interests as we choose topics. You don't always have to say something completely new and novel, but you do need a topic you can be confident about supporting, arguing, and researching on. Both interest and expandability are key factors in such a topic.

## Arriving at Topics for Writing Assignments

In academic writing, topics are sometimes dictated by the task at hand. Consider, for example, that you must conduct a lab experiment before you can sit down to write a report. Or perhaps you have to run a statistical program to get your data. In these situations, your topic is determined for you: You will write about the results of the work you have completed. Likewise, your instructor may simply hand you a topic to explore or to research. In these situations, you are delivered from both the responsibility and the rewards of choosing your own topic, and your task is to try to develop an interest in what you have been given to write about.

More often, however, you will have a bit more leeway in choosing topics of your own. Sometimes you will be asked to find a topic of interest to you that is grounded in ideas developed in shared class readings and discussions. Other times, your assignment will be anchored even less, and you will be responsible for finding a topic all on your own. Many students find that the more freedom they are given to pursue their own interests, the more intimidated they are by this freedom, and the less certain they are of what really is interesting to them. But writing assignments with open topic options can be excellent opportunities either to explore and research issues that are already concerns for you (and which may even have been topics of earlier writing) or to examine new interests. A well chosen writing topic can lead to the types of research questions that fuel your academic interests for years to come. At the very least, though, topics can be seen as occasions for making your writing relevant and meaningful to your own personal and academic concerns.

## How Purpose and Audience Affect the Choice of Topics

Before choosing and narrowing a topic to write about, consider why you are writing and who will read what you write. Your writing purpose and audience often dictate the types of topics that are available to you. (See our guide on '[Adapting to your Audience](#)' for more detailed information about writing for specific audiences.)

In the workplace, purpose and audience are often defined for you. For instance, you might have to write a memo to a co-worker explaining why a decision was made or compose a letter to a client arguing why the company cannot replace a product. In either case, your purpose and audience are obvious, and your topic is

equally evident. As a student, you may have to work a little harder to determine which topics are appropriate for particular purposes and audiences.

Oftentimes, the wording of your assignment sheet will offer clues as to the reasons why you are writing and the audience you are expected to address. Sometimes, when assignment sheets are unclear or when you misunderstand what is expected of you, you will need either to ask your instructor about purpose and audience or to make your own educated guess. However you arrive at the purpose and the audience of your writing, it is important to take these elements into consideration, since they help you to choose and narrow your topic appropriately.

## Interpreting the Assignment

### Steve Reid, English Professor

It's important to circle an assignment's key words and then ask the instructor to clarify what these words mean. Every teacher has a different vocabulary. My students always ask me what I'm looking for when I give an assignment. As a writer, you need to know what the words mean in your field and what they mean to your instructor. Specific information about what's expected for any given assignment can be ascertained through class discussion and directed research.

Many times, an assignment sheet or verbal assignment given by an instructor will reveal exactly what you are being asked to do. The first step in reviewing an assignment sheet is to circle key words or verbs, such as "explain," "describe," or "evaluate." Then, once you've identified these words, make sure you understand what your instructor means by them. For example, suppose your instructor asks you to describe the events leading up to World War II. This could mean *explaining* how the events prior to World War II helped bring about the beginning of the war, or *list* every possible cause you think led to the war, or *describe* and *analyze* the events. Inquiring before you start writing can help you determine your writing purpose and the expectations of your intended audience (usually your instructor).

## How Purpose Affects Topics

Your purpose helps you to narrow a topic, since it demands particular approaches to a general subject. For example, if you're writing about how state policy affects

foreign language study in grades K-12 in Oregon, you could have several different purposes. You may need to explain how the Oregon law came about; that is, what influenced it and who was responsible. Or perhaps you would need to explain the law's effects, how curriculum will be altered, etc. Another purpose might be to evaluate the law and to propose changes. Whatever purpose you decide to adopt will determine the questions which give direction to your topic, and (in the case of a research paper) will suggest the type of information you will need to gather in order to address those questions.

## How Audience Affects Topics

### **Steve Reid, English Professor**

You have to be careful so your topic is not too narrow for your audience. You don't want readers to say, " Well, so what? I couldn't care less." One of the most important roles a topic plays is impacting an audience. If your topic gets too narrow and too focused, it can become too academic or too pedantic. For example, every year at graduation, I watch people laugh when they hear the title of a thesis or dissertation. The students who wrote these documents were very narrowed and focused, but their audiences were very restricted.

Having a clear idea of the audience to whom you are writing will help you to determine an appropriate topic and how to present it. For example, if you're writing about how state policy affects foreign language study in grades K-12 in Oregon, you could have many different audiences. You could be writing for teachers, administrators at a specific school, students whose educational program will be affected by the law, or even the PTA. All of these audiences care about the topic since they are all affected by it. However, for each of them you may need to provide different information and address slightly different questions about this topic. Teachers would want to know why the policy was created and how it will affect what goes on in their classrooms. Parents will want to know what languages their children will be taught and why. Administrators will want to know how this will change the curriculum and what work will be required of them as a result. Knowing your audience requires you to adapt and limit your topic so that you are presenting information appropriate to a specific group of interested readers.

## Choosing Workable Topics

Most writers in the workplace don't have to think about what's workable and what's not when they write. Writing topics make themselves obvious in such situations, being the necessary outcome of particular processes. For example, meetings inspire memos and minutes; research produces reports; interactions with customers result in letters. As a student writer, your task is often more difficult than this, since topics do not always "find you" this easily.

Finding and selecting topics are oftentimes arduous tasks for the writer. Sometimes you will find yourself facing the "blank page" or "empty screen" dilemma, lacking topic ideas entirely. Other times you will have difficulties making your ideas fit a particular assignment you have been given. This section on "Choosing a Workable Topic" addresses both of these problems, offering both general strategies for generating topic ideas and strategies for finding topics appropriate to particular types of writing assignments that students frequently encounter.

### How to Find a Topic

#### **Don Zimmerman, Journalism and Technical Communication Professor**

I look at topics from a problem solving perspective and scientific method. Topics emerge from writers working on the job when they're in the profession, following major trends, developments, issues, etc. From the scientific perspective, topics emerge based on solid literature reviews and developing an understanding of the paradigm. From these then come the specific problems/topics/subjects that professionals or scientists address.

Writers generate topics from their professional expertise, their understanding of the issues in their respective disciplines, and their understanding of the science that has gone before them.

While your first impulse may be to dash off to the library to dig through books and journals once you've received an assignment, you might also consider other information sources available to you.

## **Related Information: Making Use of Computer Sources**

One hugely valuable source of topic ideas is obviously the Internet. Many sites can provide you with current perspectives on a subject and can lead you to other relevant sites. You can also find and join forums and groups where your general subject or topic is discussed daily (such as Reddit). This will allow you to ask questions of experts, as well as to read what issues are currently important. Massive scholarly databases, such as Google Scholar and JSTOR, can also help provide more reputable sources for research.

## **Related Information: Making Use of Library Sources**

It is always helpful, particularly in the case of writing assignments which demand research, to visit the library and talk to a reference librarian when generating topic ideas. This way, you not only get to discuss your topic ideas with another expert, but you will also have more resources pointed out to you. There is usually a wealth of journals, reference books, and online resources related to your topic area(s) that you may not even know exist. An expert at the library may have better knowledge of specialized sources which you may not be able to access through Google Scholar or JSTOR.

## **Related Information: Talking to Others Around You**

The people around you are often some of the best sources of information available to you. It is always valuable to talk informally about your assignment and any topic ideas you have with classmates, friends, family, tutors, professionals in the field, or any other interested and/or knowledgeable people. Remember, too, that a topic is not a surprise gift that must be kept from your instructor until you hand in your paper. Instructors are almost always happy to discuss potential topics with a student once he or she has an

idea or two, and getting response to your work early in the writing process whenever possible is a good plan. Discussing your topic ideas in these ways may lead you to other ideas, and eventually to a well-defined topic.

## Subjects and Topics

Most topic searches start with a subject. For example, you're interested in writing about languages, and even more specifically, foreign languages. This is a general subject. Within a general subject, you'll find millions of topics. Not only about every foreign language ever spoken, but also about hundreds of issues affecting foreign languages. But keep in mind that a subject search is always a good place to start.

Every time you use Google or another search engine, or even SAGE at the CSU library, you conduct a subject search. These search devices allow you to review many topics within a broad subject area. While it's beneficial to conduct subject searches, because you never know what valuable information you'll uncover, a subject always needs to be narrowed to a specific topic. This way, you can avoid writing a lengthy book and focus instead on the short research paper you've been assigned.

## Starting With What You Know

### **Kate Kiefer, English Professor**

Most often the occasion dictates the topic for the writing done outside academe. But as a writer in school, you do sometimes have to generate topics. If you need help determining a topic, create an authority list of things you have some expertise in or a general list of areas you know something about and are interested in. Then, you can make this list more specific by considering how much you know and care about these ideas and what the target audience is probably interested in reading about.

In looking for writing topics, the logical first step is to consider issues or subjects which have concerned you in the past, either on the basis of life experience or prior writing/research. If you are a journal writer, look to your journal for ideas. If not, think about writing you have done for other writing assignments or for other classes. Though it is obviously not acceptable to recycle old essays you have written before,

it is more than acceptable (even advisable) to return to and to extend topics you have written about in the past. Returning to the issues that concern you perennially is ultimately what good scholarship is all about.

## **Related Information: Choosing Topics You Want to Know More About**

Even though your personal experience and prior knowledge are good places to start when looking for writing topics, it is important not to rule out those topics about which you know very little, and would like to know more. A writing assignment can be an excellent opportunity to explore a topic you have been wanting to know more about, even if you don't have a strong base knowledge to begin with. This type of topic would, of course, require more research and investigation initially, but it would also have the benefit of being compelling to you by virtue of its "newness."

## **Related Information: How to Pull Topics from Your Personal Experience**

It is a good idea to think about how elements of your own life experience and environment could serve as topics for writing, even if you have never thought of them in that way. Think about the topics of recent conversations you have had, events in your life that are significant to you, problems in your workplace, family issues, matters having to do with college or campus life, or current events that evoke response from you. Taking a close look at the issues in your immediate environment is a good place to start in writing, even if those issues seem to you at first to be unworthy of your writing focus. Not all writing assignments have a personal dimension, but our interests and concerns are always, at their roots, personal.

## **General Strategies for Coming Up With Topics**



Before attempting to choose or narrow a topic, you need to have some ideas to choose from. This can be a problem if you are suffering from the "blank page or screen" syndrome, and have not even any initial, general ideas for writing topics.

## Brainstorming

As writers, some of our best ideas occur to us when we are thinking in a very informal, uninhibited way. Though we often think of brainstorming as a way for *groups* to come up with ideas, it is a strategy that *individual* writers can make use of as well. Simply put, brainstorming is the process of listing rough thoughts (in any form they occur to you: words, phrases, or complete sentences) that are connected (even remotely) to the writing assignment you have before you or the subject area you already have in mind. Brainstorming works best when you give yourself a set amount of time (perhaps five or ten minutes), writing down anything that comes to mind within that period of time, and resisting the temptation to criticize or polish your own ideas as they hit the page. There is time for examination and polishing when the five or ten minutes are over.

## Freewriting

Freewriting is a technique much like brainstorming, only the ideas generated are written down in paragraph rather than list form. When you freewrite, you allow yourself a set amount of time (perhaps five or ten minutes), and you write down any and every idea that comes to mind as if you are writing a timed essay. However, your freewrite is unlikely to read like an organized essay. In fact, it *shouldn't* read that way. What is most important about freewriting is that you write continuously, not stopping to check your spelling, to find the right word, or even to think about how your ideas are fitting together. If you are unable to think of something to write, simply jot out, "I can't think of anything to write now," and go on. At the end of your five or ten minutes, reread what you have written, ignore everything that seems unimportant or ridiculous, and give attention to whatever ideas you think are worth pursuing. If you are able to avoid checking yourself while you are writing for that short time, you will probably be surprised at the number of ideas that you already have.

## Clustering

Clustering is a way of visually "mapping" your ideas on paper. It is a technique which works well for people who are able to best understand relationships between ideas by seeing the way they play themselves out spatially. (If you prefer reading maps to reading written directions, clustering may be the strategy for you.) Unlike formal outlining, which tends to be very linear, clustering allows you to explore the way ideas sprawl in different directions. When one thought leads to another, you can place that idea on the "map" in its appropriate place. And if you want to change its position later, and connect it with another idea, you can do so. (It is always a good idea to use a pencil rather than a pen for clustering, for this very reason.)

This is a good strategy not only for generating ideas, but also for determining how much you have to say about a topic (or topics), and how related or scattered your ideas are.

### **Related Information: Example of Brainstorming**

#### **Ideas on a Current Issue:**

- multiculturalism
- training of teachers
- teaching strategies
- cultural difference in the classroom
- teaching multicultural texts
- language issues
- English only
- Ebonics
- assimilation, checking cultural identity at the door
- home language/dialect as intentionally different from school language
- How many languages can we teach? (How multi-lingual must teachers be?)
- Is standard English really "standard"?
- success in school
- statistics on students who speak "non-English" languages or established dialects
- the difference between a dialect and a language

- Ebonics v. bi-lingual education

## Related Information: Example of Freewriting

**Problem:** Development of Small Towns in the Rocky Mountain Region

When I grew up in Anyoldtown, New Mexico, it was a small town in the smallest sense: no movie theaters, no supermarkets, nothing. We had to go into town for the things we needed. Land sold for \$2000 an acre. Now it sells for about \$50,000 an acre. Anyoldtown was also primarily hispanic, and the families who lived there had very little. Now the people who live there are mostly white and almost exclusively professionals: doctors, lawyers, stockbrokers, and an endless number of people who have money that seems to have come from nowhere. There are good things to be had there now: good restaurants, good coffee, and all the other things that come along with Yuppie invasion. But those things were had at quite a cost. People who used to live in Anyoldtown when I was a kid can no longer afford to pay property taxes. I can't think of anything else to write now. Oh, yes...these people made a killing off the sale of their land and properties, but they had to give up the places they had lived all their lives. However, by the time they sold, Anyoldtown was no longer the place where they had lived all their lives anyway.

## Strategies for Finding Topics Appropriate to Particular Types of Assignments

Sometimes your ways of generating topics will depend on the type of writing assignment you have been given. Here are some ideas of strategies you can use in finding topics for some of the more common types of writing assignments:

- Essays Based on Personal Experience
- Essays Responding to or Interpreting Texts
- Essays in Which You Take a Position on an Issue (Argument)
- Essays Requiring Research
- Essays in Which You Evaluate
- Essays in Which You Propose Solutions to Problems

## Essays Based on Personal Experience

The great challenge of using personal experience in essays is trying to remember the kinds of significant events, places, people, or objects that would prove to be interesting and appropriate topics for writing. Brainstorming, freewriting, or clustering ideas in particular ways can give you a starting point.

Here are a few ways that you might trigger your memory:

Interview people you've known for a long time. Family members, friends, and other significant people in your life can remember important details and events that you haven't thought about for years.

Try to remember events from a particular time in your life. Old yearbooks, journals, and newspapers and magazines can help to trigger some of these memories.

Think about times of particular fulfillment or adversity. These "extremes" in your experience are often easily recalled and productively discussed. When have you had to make difficult choices, for instance? When have you undergone ethical struggles? When have you felt most successful?

Think about the groups you have encountered at various times in your life. When have you felt most like you belonged to or were excluded from groups of people: your family, cliques in school, clubs, "tracked" groups in elementary school, religious groups, or any other community/organization you have had contact with?

Think about the people or events that "changed your life." What are the forces that have most significantly influenced and shaped you? What are the circumstances surrounding academic, career, or relationship choices that you have made? What changes have you dealt with that have been most painful or most satisfying?

Try to remember any "firsts" in your experience. What was your first day of high school like? What was it like to travel far from home for the first time? What was your first hobby or interest as a child? What was the first book you checked out of the library? These "firsts," when you are able to remember them, can prove to have tremendous significance.

One word of caution on writing about personal experience: Keep in mind that any essay you write for a class will most likely be read by others, and will probably be evaluated on criteria other than your topic's importance to you. Never feel like you need to "confess," dredge up painful memories, or tell stories that are uncomfortable to you in academic writing. Save these topics for your own personal journal unless you are certain that you are able to distance yourself from them enough to handle the response that comes from instructors (and sometimes from peers).

## Essays Responding to or Interpreting Texts

Students are often asked to respond to or interpret essays, articles, books, stories, poems, and a variety of other texts. Sometimes your instructor will ask you to respond to one particular reading, other times you will have a choice of class readings, and still other times you will need to choose a reading on your own.

If you are given a choice of texts to respond to or to interpret, it is a good idea to choose one which is complex enough to hold your interest in the process of careful examination. It is not necessarily a problem if you do not completely understand a text on first reading it. What matters is that it challenges, intrigues, and/or evokes response from you in some way.

### **Related Information: Writing in the Margins of Texts**

Many of us were told at some point in our schooling never to write in books. This makes sense in the case of books which don't belong to us (like library books or the dusty, tattered, thirty year-old copies of Hamlet distributed to us in high school). But in the case of books and photocopies which we have made on our own, writing in the margins can be one of the most productive ways to begin the writing process.

As you read, it is a good idea to make a habit of *annotating*, or writing notes in the margins. Your notes could indicate places in the text which remind you of experiences you have had or of other texts you have read. They could point out questions that you have, points of agreement or disagreement, or

moments of complete confusion. Annotations begin a dialogue between you and the text you have before you, documenting your first (and later) responses, and they are valuable when you attempt at a later time to write about that text in a particular way.

## Essays in Which You Take a Position on an Issue

One of the most common writing assignments given is some variation on the Arguing Essay, in which students are asked to take a position on a controversial issue. There are two challenges involved in finding topics for argument. One challenge is identifying a topic that you are truly interested in and concerned about, enough so that whatever research is required will be engrossing (or at the very least, tolerable), and not a tedious, painful ordeal. In other words, you want to try to avoid arriving at the "So what?" point with your own topic. The other challenge is in making sure that your audience doesn't respond, "So what?" in reading your approach to your topic. You can avoid this by making sure that the questions you are asking and addressing are current and interesting.

## Related Information: Examining Social Phenomena and Trends

In *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, Third Edition, Rise B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper discuss the importance of looking toward social phenomena and trends for sources of argument topics. A *phenomenon*, they explain, is "something notable about the human condition or the social order" (314). A few of the examples of phenomena that they list are difficulties with parking on college campuses, negative campaigning in politics, popular artistic or musical styles, and company loyalty. A *trend*, on the other hand, is "a significant change extending over many months or years" (314). Some trends they list are the decline of Communism, diminishing concern over world hunger, increased practice of homeschooling, and increased legitimacy of pop art. Trying to think in terms of incidental, current social phenomena or long-term, gradual social trends is a good way of arriving at workable topics for essays requiring you to take a position.

## Related Information: Making Sure Your Approach to Your Topic is Current and Interesting

In choosing a topic for an arguing essay, it is important to get a handle not only on *what* is currently being debated, but *how* it is being debated. In other words, it is necessary to learn what questions are currently being asked about certain topics and why. In order to avoid the "so what" dilemma, you want to approach your topic in a way that is not simplistic, tired, outdated, or redundant. For example, if you are looking at the relationship of children to television, you probably would want to avoid a topic like "the effects of t.v. violence on children" (which has been beaten to death over the years) in favor of a topic like "different toy marketing strategies for young male v.s. female viewers of Saturday morning cartoons" (a topic that seems at least a bit more original).

As a student writer, you are usually not asked to break absolutely new ground on a topic during your college career. However, you are expected to try to find ground that is less rather than more trampled when finding and approaching writing topics.

Trying to think in terms of incidental, current social phenomena or long-term, gradual social trends is a good way of arriving at workable topics for essays requiring you to take a position.

## Related Information: Sources of Topics

### Looking to Your Own Writing

When trying to rediscover the issues which have concerned you in the past, go back to journal entries (if you are a journal writer) or essays that you have written before. As you look through this formal and informal writing, consider whether or not these issues still concern you, and what (specifically) you now have to say about them. Are these matters which would concern readers other than yourself, or are they too specific to your own life to be interesting and

controversial to a reading audience? Is there a way to give a "larger" significance to matters of personal concern? For example, if you wrote in your journal that you were unhappy with a particular professor's outdated teaching methods, could you turn that idea into a discussion of the downfalls of the tenure system? If you were frustrated with the way that your anthropology instructor dismissed your comment about the ways that "primitive" women are discussed, could you think of that problem in terms of larger gender issues? Sometimes your frustrations and mental conflicts are simply your own gripes, but more often than not they can be linked with current and widely debated issues.

### **Looking to Your Other Classes**

When given an assignment which asks you to work with a controversial issue, always try to brainstorm points of controversy that you recall from current or past courses. What are people arguing about in the various disciplines? Sometimes these issues will seem irrelevant because they appear only to belong to those other disciplines, but there are oftentimes connections that can be made. For example, perhaps you have been asked in a communications class to write an essay on a language issue. You might remember that in a class on information systems, your class debated whether or not Internet news groups are truly diverse or not. You might begin to think about the reasons why news groups are (or aren't) diverse, thinking about the way that language is used. Consider sources that contain one narrative as well as those with a multitude of voices and perspectives, as they will each provide different types of information on your topic.

### **Reading Newspapers and Magazines**

If you are not already an avid newspaper and magazine reader, become one for a week. Pore over the different sections: news, editorials, sports, and even cartoons. Look for items that connect with your own life experiences, and pay attention to those which evoke some strong response from you for one reason or another. Even if an issue that you discover in a newspaper or magazine doesn't prove to be a workable topic, it might lead you to other topic ideas.



## Interviewing the People Around You

If you are at a loss to find an issue that lights a fire under you, determine what fires up your friends, family members, and classmates. Think back to heated conversations you have had at the dinner table, or conduct interviews in which you ask the people around you what issues impact their lives most directly. Because you share many experiences and contexts with these people, it is likely that at least some of the issues that concern them will also concern you.

## Using the Internet

It is useful to browse the Internet for current, controversial issues. Spend some time surfing aimlessly, or wander through forums and subreddits to see what's being discussed. Using the Internet can be one of the best ways to determine what is immediately and significantly controversial/relevant.

## Essays Requiring Research

Although some essays that students are asked to write are to be based solely on their own thoughts and experience, oftentimes (particularly in upper level courses) writing assignments require research. When scoping out possible research topics, it is important to remember to choose a topic which will sustain your interest throughout the research and writing process. The best research topics are those which are complex enough that they offer opportunities for various research questions. You want to avoid choosing a topic that could bore you easily, or that is easily researched but not very interesting to you.

As always, it is good to start searching for a topic within your personal interests and previous writing. You might want to choose a research topic that you have pursued before and do additional research, or you might want to select a topic about which you would like to know more. More than anything, writers must remember that research will often carry them in different directions than they intend to go, and that they must be flexible enough to acknowledge that their research questions and topics must sometimes be adjusted or abandoned. To read more on narrowing and adjusting a research topic, see the section in this guide on Research Considerations.

## **Related Information: Flexibility in Research**

As you conduct your research, it is important to keep in mind that the questions you are asking about your topic (and oftentimes, the topic itself) will probably change slightly. Sometimes you are forced to acknowledge that there is too much or too little information available on the topic you have chosen. Other times, you might decide that the approach you were originally taking is not as interesting to you as others you have found. For instance, you might start with a topic like "foreign language studies in grades K-12 in Oregon," and in the process of your reading you might find that you are really more interested in "bilingual education in rural Texas." Still other times, you might find that the claim you were attempting to make about your topic is not arguable, or is just wrong.

Our research can carry us in directions that we don't always foresee, and part of being a good researcher is maintaining the flexibility necessary to explore those directions when they present themselves.

## **Related Information: How Research Narrows Topics**

By necessity, most topics narrow themselves as you read more and more about them. Oftentimes writers come up with topics that they think will be sufficiently narrow and engaging--a topic like "multiculturalism and education," for instance--and discover through their initial reading that there are many different avenues they could take in examining the various aspects of this broad issue. Although such discoveries are often humbling and sometimes intimidating, they are also a necessary part of any effective research process. You can take some comfort in knowing that you do not always need to have your topic narrowed to its final form before you begin researching. The sources you read will help you to do the necessary narrowing and definition of your focus.

## Related Information: Research Topics and Writing Assignments

When you are choosing a research topic, it is important to be realistic about the time and space limitations that your assignment dictates. If you are writing a graduate thesis or dissertation, for instance, you might be able to research a topic as vast and as time-honored as "the portrayal of women in the poetry of William Blake." But if your assignment asks you to produce a five-page essay by next Tuesday, you might want to focus on something a bit more accessible, like "the portrayal of women in Blake's `The Visions of the Daughters of Albion.'"

## Related Information: Testing Research Topics

Early in your research and writing process, after you have found a somewhat narrow avenue into your topic, put the topic to the test to see if you really want to pursue it further in research. Rise B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper, in *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, Third Edition, suggest some questions writers might ask themselves when deciding whether or not a research topic is workable:

- Does this topic really interest me?
- Do I know enough about it now to plan and write my essay, or can I learn what I need to know in the time I have remaining?
- Is the topic manageable within my time and space limits?
- Do I have a good sense of how others view this issue and what readers I might address in my essay?
- Have I begun to understand the issue and to formulate my own view?

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### Essays in Which You Evaluate

Students are often asked to write essays in which they evaluate something: a product, a piece of writing, a restaurant, an advertising campaign, or some other

entity related to their areas of study. Sometimes when you are given this type of writing assignment, you are also given a very specific topic on which to write. Other times, you are asked to find a topic for evaluation on your own.

## **Related Information: Comparing and Contrasting**

After brainstorming a list of possible topics for evaluation, you may find it difficult to determine whether or not you will be able to effectively evaluate those topics. One way of stimulating your mind's evaluative tendencies is to try comparison and contrast. For example, if you are thinking about evaluating a local Thai restaurant, and you are having trouble coming up with points on which to evaluate it, try comparing and contrasting it with another local Thai restaurant. When we begin to compare two items, ideas, places, or people, we invariably wind up evaluating.

## **Related Information: Generating an Authority List**

If the choice of topics to evaluate is open to you, try brainstorming a list of skills, activities, places, or subjects that you consider yourself to be an authority about. A list like this is a good starting point for just about any essay, but it is particularly useful in evaluation. If you are an avid rock climber, for instance, it makes perfect sense for you to evaluate climbing equipment, since your experience will provide you with a basis for evaluation. It may still be necessary to do research, but you will have a head start even before you begin researching.

## **Related Information: Questions to Ask Yourself as You Evaluate**

In testing possible topics for evaluation, you might ask yourself some very general questions about your initial thoughts. Rise B. Axelrod and Charles R. Cooper, in their *St. Martin's Guide to Writing*, Third Edition, suggest a few such questions:

- How certain am I of my judgment? Do I have any doubts? Why do I feel the way I do?
- Do I like (or dislike) everything about my subject, or only certain parts?
- Are there any similar things I should consider (other products or movies, for example)?
- Is there anything I will need to do right away in order to research this subject authoritatively?
- If I need to do any research, can I get the information I need?

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## Essays in Which You Propose Solutions to Problems

As a writer, you will sometimes be asked to speculate on possible solutions to known problems. Although the process of problem solving is itself quite difficult, one of the greatest challenges about that process is the matter of finding a topic that lends itself to your purpose.

### **Related Information: Evaluating and Problem Solving**

Problem solving is an extension of the evaluating process. If in the past you have written evaluative essays which identify certain problems, these essays might offer you some topic ideas and starting points. You might also look to personal writing you have done (like journal entries) or recent conversations you have had as ways of recalling the types of problems that you have identified in your general environment.

### **Related Information: Focusing on Solvable Problems**

Obviously, not all problems are appropriate topics for short problem solving essays. For example, if your instructor assigns a ten-page problem solving essay dealing with a current problem of your choice, you might want to avoid a topic as vast as "racism." However, if you were to focus on a more context-

specific version of this hulking problem, you might find a workable topic (say, for instance, minority enrollment on your campus). For assignments like these, it is important to choose problems that appear solvable (or at least approachable) in the time and space you have available to you.

## **Related Information: Identifying Problems Within Communities**

One excellent source of topics for problem solving essays is your immediate environment. Think about the groups or communities to which you belong: your neighborhood, college, family, ethnic and cultural groups, religious and political groups, workplace, and recreational groups. Try to brainstorm a list of problems that you can readily identify in any of these communities, then consider both how solvable these problems are and how appropriate they are to your writing assignment.

### **Generating More Than One Topic Idea**

In order to choose a topic, you need to have several available to choose from. It is best to avoid being committed to one topic at this first stage of the writing process, since not every topic will pan out. Writers are usually more successful when they have a selection of topics which they can put to the test to determine whether or not they are workable (given the writing assignment).

### **Narrowing Topics**

The scope of a topic depends on how much time and space you have to write and how much detail you are trying to use. For example, describing all the causes of World War II in three pages is impossible. You would have to either narrow your topic some more or write hundreds of pages to adequately discuss every cause. Defining your topic before you start writing will save you time and help you to research and/or to develop your thinking in a clear, methodical way.

It is important to examine the topics we choose to determine whether they are too broad (or, in some instances, too narrow) for the writing assignments we are given.

Once you have decided that a topic is too broad to be appropriate to your assignment (which is most often the case), you will need to have ways to narrow it. You will also want to consider, when writing essays that require research, how your research resources and limitations affect your choice of topics.

## Deciding When a Topic is Too Broad

### **Kate Kiefer, English Professor**

If a writer doesn't present details quickly enough, then the topic is usually too broad. If the reader can expect the paper to go in one direction, but it goes in another, the topic is usually too broad or not stated precisely enough. If I can ask six million questions about whether the writer will include this or that point, the topic is too broad. If I do a library search and turn up 200 listings (or an Internet search and discover 1,000 hits), the topic is too broad.

A topic is too broad to be workable when you find that you have too many different (but oftentimes remotely related) ideas about that topic. While you want to start the writing process with as many ideas as possible, you will want to narrow your focus at some point so that you aren't attempting to do too much in one essay.

Where essays requiring research are concerned, your topic is too broad if you are able to find thousands of sources when conducting a simple library or Internet search. For example, conducting a search on "foreign languages in Oregon" will provide you with policies, foreign language departments, and cultural issues (just to name a few). When this happens, you can try various narrowing strategies to determine what most interests you about your topic area and what relates to your own life most readily. For instance, if you plan to study abroad, focusing on the language you'll be speaking might be a way to narrow the scope of your original topic, "foreign languages in Oregon."

## Deciding When a Topic Is Too Narrow

### **Steve Reid, English Professor**

You have to be careful so your topic is not too narrow for your audience. You don't want readers to say, "Well, so what? I couldn't care less." One of the most important roles a topic plays is impacting an audience. If you get so narrowed and

focused, a topic can become too academic or pedantic. For example, every year at graduation I watch people laugh when they hear the title of a thesis or dissertation. The students who wrote these documents were very narrowed and focused, but their audiences were very restricted.

Though student writers most often face the challenge of limiting a topic that is too broad, they occasionally have to recognize that they have chosen a topic that is too narrow or that they have narrowed a workable topic too much. A topic is too narrow if you can't find any information about it. For example, suppose your foreign language is subject to, "foreign language policy in South Dakota." Although you might have a strong interest in this topic, South Dakota may not have a specific policy about foreign languages. If you have chosen the topic, "teaching Chinese in elementary schools," and your research attempts have been fruitless, it may be that you are considering a topic that no one else has previously presented. In other words, no one has determined that Chinese should be a major language taught as commonly as Spanish or French. If this happens to be the case, keep your topic in mind, because it could very well be an excellent topic for a graduate thesis or dissertation. However, it is also likely to be a difficult topic to handle in a ten-page essay for an education class, due in two weeks.

If your topic is too narrow, try making it broader by asking yourself related questions.

- What foreign languages are taught in South Dakota schools?
- Or where is Chinese taught and why?

Once you've found a different direction in which to move with your topic, you can try narrowing it again.

## General Strategies for Narrowing Topics

One of the first things writers do when they realize that they need to narrow the scope of their topic is to ask themselves the "w" questions so familiar to journalists: Who? What? Where? When? and Why? (and oftentimes, How?) These questions can help you locate your specific points of interest within your general topic area. For example, to narrow a topic like "foreign languages," you could begin with the "what" and "when" questions and decide you are interested in "foreign language



studies in grades K-12." Asking the "where" question, you might arrive at "foreign language studies in grades K-12 in Oregon." And asking the "who" question might cause you to limit the topic again to "state policy regarding foreign language studies in grades K-12 in Oregon." Each time you add something specific to your topic, you place "restrictors" on it, thereby narrowing it. Then, when you conduct a library or Internet search, you can use these "restrictors" as key words.

## **Related Information: Looping**

Looping is an extended version of freewriting in which you begin with an initial five-minute freewrite on a general topic, then select out of that bit of writing the sentence or idea that interests you the most. You then use that sentence or idea as the basis for your next five-minute round of freewriting. You continue this process of elaborating informally on specific ideas until you come to a point where your topic seems sufficiently narrow, researchable, and appropriate to your writing assignment.

### **Example of Looping**

If I am freewriting on the general (and overly broad) topic of "development of small towns in the Rocky Mountain region," I might start with the following initial ideas:

#### ***Problem: Development of Small Towns in the Rocky Mountain Region***

When I grew up in Anyoldtown, New Mexico, it was a small town in the smallest sense: no movie theaters, no supermarkets, nothing. We had to go into town for the things we needed. Land sold for \$2000 an acre. Now it sells for about \$50,000 an acre. Anyoldtown was also primarily hispanic, and the families who lived there had very little. Now the people who live there are mostly white and almost exclusively professionals: doctors, lawyers, stockbrokers, and an endless number of people who have money that seems to have come from nowhere. There are good things to be had there now: good restaurants, good coffee, and all the other things that come along with Yuppie invasion. But those things were had at quite a cost. People who used to live in

Anyoldtown when I was a kid can no longer afford to pay property taxes. I can't think of anything else to write now. Oh, yes...these people made a killing off the sale of their land and properties, but they had to give up the places they had lived all their lives. However, by the time they sold, Anyoldtown was no longer the place where they had lived all their lives anyway.

Rereading what I have written, I might decide that what interests me the most and seems most appropriate to the writing assignment I have been given is my idea about the property tax dilemma. With this in mind, I would write a second "loop" on this area of my thinking, perhaps even starting my freewriting with the exact sentence I used in the first "loop:"

*People who used to live in Anyoldtown when I was a kid can no longer afford to pay property taxes. This is unfair, because these people spent their entire lives in this town, and land was all they had. Theoretically, the Yuppie Invasion doesn't drive out the "townies" or "natives" of a small town, but in actuality, land values and property taxes (as well as cultural influences, of course) make it impossible (and oftentimes undesirable) for people to hold onto their own land. People have to sell, because if they don't, they can no longer afford to maintain the standard of living that their town has taken on (in more ways than one). This issue obviously has class implications, but I'm sure it also relates to cultural (ethnic) issues as well. This is where I would need to begin researching, if I wanted to see who was most negatively affected by rising property taxes and land values.*

In rereading this second loop, I might decide that my ideas toward the end of the paragraph interest me the most. I could write another loop expanding these specific ideas on race, class, and property taxes, or I might decide that I have (as my freewrite suggests) arrived at the point where I need to begin researching.

## **Related Information: Questioning**

Alongside the basic "5 W's" ("who," "what," "when," "where," and "why") can be used more formal, directed questions provided by the classical rhetorical "topics." These questions function in four different ways, and can be categorized as follows:

Definition:	These questions help you to define your topic.
Comparison:	These questions ask you to compare and contrast your topic with other related topics.
Relationship:	These questions lead you to examine the causes and/or the effects of your topic.
Testimony:	These questions ask you to determine what has already been said or written about your topic.

### Example of Questioning

If my general topic is "Development of Small Towns in the Rocky Mountain Region," I might try to narrow my focus by applying questions with specific functions to this topic area, thereby discovering which approach interests me most. Here are some of the questions I might ask:

Questions of Definition:	What is the situation in the Rocky Mountain region in terms of development? How can this situation be characterized, described, classified, or analyzed?
Questions of Comparison:	How does development in this region compare with development in other regions? In what ways is it similar? In what ways is it different?
Questions of Relationships:	What caused this problem of development? What changes occurred which contributed to the problem? What causes people to want to develop this region? What are the effects or the consequences of the development?

Who is most directly affected by the development of small towns?

What do the "natives" or "townies" who have lived all their lives in these towns think about the development?

What do contractors think?

Testimony: What have some towns done to control development?

What research has already been done on this topic?

What is the general opinion(s) in the Rocky Mountain region concerning development, and why?

After writing the questions, I would write my responses, deciding which particular questions and responses interest me the most. Perhaps, for instance, I would find myself most interested in the effects of development on the "natives" of small towns, particularly the inevitability of increased property taxes. This process of questioning thus provides me with a specific, narrow, well-defined focus within the vast issue of development of small towns in the Rocky Mountain region.

## **Related Information: Topic Cross**

The topic cross helps you to narrow your topic by using a visual strategy. Just as you would focus a camera or a microscope, you arrange key words and phrases about your topic in such a way that they eventually point to your specific area of interest.

### **Example of a Topic Cross**

The first step in the process of using the topic cross is brainstorming. Spend a few minutes listing words and phrases that come to mind when you think about your topic. Then decide which words and phrases are most interesting and arrange them in a hierarchy, moving from general (at the top of the list) to specific (at the bottom of the list). This hierarchy will become the vertical axis of your cross.

Demonstration: If my topic is "development of small towns in the Rocky

Mountain region," I might generate the following useful ideas in brainstorming (arranged from general to specific).

- The appeal of small towns
- Yuppie invasion
- Overcrowding in cities
- Cost of land
- Effects on town "natives."
- Economic effects on impoverished landowners.
- How John Doe in my home town was affected.
- The new espresso bar in town

I would write this list in an imagined middle column of a piece of blank paper or a computer screen, leaving plenty of space between each item. Then I would scan the list to determine where my real interest lies. Which topics in this list will be too broad to write about, given my writing assignment? Which will be too narrow? In this case, I might choose "economic effects on impoverished landowners" as a workable topic area.

Once I had thus identified my area of interest, I would begin listing words and phrases about or relevant to that item, placing them on the horizontal axis of my topic cross. The list I would generate about "economic effects on impoverished landowners" might look like this:

- Increased cost of land
- Temptation to sell
- Rising property taxes
- Higher cost of living
- Zoning issues
- Pressure to maintain property value

Examining this list, I might decide that "rising property taxes" is a sufficiently narrow topic that is not *too* narrow to develop with my own ideas and research I might do. By using this strategy, I have arrived at a narrow, workable topic.

## Research Considerations

If your writing assignment requires research, you will probably find that the research process itself will dictate how broad or narrow your topic should be. We have all had the experience of doing a library search on a word like "environment" and coming up with thousands of sources. Almost as common is the experience of searching for a term like "cultural animation" and coming up with only one source that seems useful. The topics we choose are often directly related to our research processes and their results.

## Moving from Topic to Thesis

It is important to remember that a narrow topic is not the same thing as a thesis statement. Unlike a topic, a thesis makes a claim of fact, provides a claim of value, or makes a recommendation about a topic under consideration. For example, your narrowed topic might be "the underemphasis on foreign language in U.S. secondary schools." A focused thesis statement making a claim about this topic might read, "U.S. secondary schools should require elementary students to take at least one course in a foreign language sometime during the 4th through 6th grades."

Transforming a workable topic into a possible thesis is really just a continuation of the narrowing process, with an emphasis on what you want to say *about* your topic. In this way, it is much like the "hypothesis" stage of the scientific method. You arrive at a thesis by attempting to make a statement about the topic you have chosen.

## Developing a Working Thesis

A working thesis is a tentative statement that you make about your topic early in the writing process, for the purpose of directing your thinking early. This thesis is likely to change somewhat or to be abandoned altogether as you move through the writing process, so it is best not to become too enamored of it.

There are two components of a working thesis. The first is, quite simply, your topic; and the second is your tentative statement about your topic. For example, if my narrowed topic is

"Rising property taxes in small towns in the Rocky Mountain region..."

I might add the following statement *about* that topic:

"...cause longtime residents and landowners in those towns not to be able to keep their property."

As I begin whatever research is necessary to support this thesis, I might find that I can't make this much of a claim. Or I might find that there are complexities that I hadn't considered. As I uncover new information about my topic, I will want to alter my working thesis accordingly, until it is workable and supportable.

### Arriving at a Possible Thesis for an Essay Requiring Research

A In *The St. Martin's Handbook*, Third Edition [italics], Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors suggest a process for moving from a topic to a research "hypothesis," by way of examining the "issue" at hand and framing this issue as a "research question." The following is an example of how I might move from topic to hypothesis if my narrowed topic is "rising property taxes in small towns in the Rocky Mountain region."

- **Topic:** Rising property taxes in small towns in the Rocky Mountain region
- **Issue:** The effects of these rising taxes on long-time residents and landowners in the small towns
- **Research Question:** What are the effects of rising property taxes on long-time residents and landowners in small towns in the Rocky Mountain region?
- **Hypothesis:** Because these taxes are increasingly difficult to pay, small town "natives" find themselves unable to hold onto their property.

This hypothesis, like a working thesis, is simply an early speculation on what I might find when I begin to research. As I read more and more about my topic, I will probably find that I need to make changes to the hypothesis in order to make it a supportable thesis. As I uncover new information about my topic, I will want to alter my working thesis accordingly, until it is workable and supportable.

### Arriving at a Possible Thesis for an Essay Requiring You to Take a Position

One of the greatest challenges in written argument is determining what it is that you would like to (and are able to) say about your topic.

### **Narrowing from Topic to Thesis in Argument**

Before you begin drafting an argument paper, you need to decide (tentatively, at least) what it is that you will be arguing about the topic you have chosen. The following prompts should help you focus your argument from a topic to a position on that topic.

What is your topic? (e.g.--Rising property taxes in small towns in the Rocky Mountain region)

What are three controversies associated with this topic? (e.g.--Rising property taxes make the town affordable only to the wealthy. This changes the flavor of the town. It forces long-time land owners to sell their land.)

What are three questions people might ask about these controversies? (e.g.--Are these rising property taxes, which are the results of development in small towns in the Rocky Mountain region, forcing long-time land owners out of their home towns? Are rising taxes and land values changing the whole cultural and economic foundation of the towns? Given the effects of rising property taxes on impoverished land owners in small towns, is development in this area a good idea?)

Decide which of these questions you are most interested in exploring. (e.g.--Given the effects of rising property taxes on impoverished land owners in small towns, is development in this area a good idea?)

Now list several ways people might respond if you asked them your question. (e.g.--No, because impoverished land owners are unable to maintain the new standard of living. Yes, because development is always a good idea. Yes, because development is inevitable, and we can do nothing about it. Perhaps, but city planners and local governments must find ways to protect the interests of impoverished land owners when they determine property taxes.)



Finally, decide where you stand in this range of responses. Think of a thesis that expresses your view. Write out your thesis and revise it throughout your research process until it is specific and takes a single arguable position. (e.g.--Because impoverished land owners in small towns in the Rocky Mountain region are often badly hurt by the rising property taxes resulting from development, city planners and local governments must find ways to protect the interests of these land owners when they determine property taxes.)

## **Working With Topics in Different Disciplines**

### **Don Zimmerman, Journalism and Technical Communication Professor**

Writers' understanding of topics and their fields of study allow them to focus on a specific topic. Following a good problem solving process or scientific method can help you select a topic. Whereas on the job, topics emerge from day to day activities. When working, you don't need to look for topics to write about. Your respective field/job responsibilities allow you to find the problems.

The ways that topics are approached and the types of topics that are discussed vary from discipline to discipline. It is important to investigate the types of topics that are discussed (and the ways that they are discussed) in your own discipline.

As a writer, it is necessary to determine what topics are talked about and why in your own discipline (or in the discipline for which you are writing). This can be done by way of talking to professionals in the discipline, looking at relevant journals, and conducting Internet and database searches (to name a few possibilities).

### **Related Information: Browsing Journals Important to Your Discipline**

Almost every discipline has journals that are associated with it, and scholars in the discipline depend on these journals in order to remain informed about what topics are being discussed. For example, scholars in the field of psychology rely on psychological journals; doctors rely on medical journals;

and English professors rely on literary journals. Because journals are at the center of each discipline's current discussions, it is a good idea to browse them when looking for current topics. If you are unsure of how to go about doing this, talk to a professor in your discipline, a reference librarian in your library, or a librarian in your library's Current Periodicals room. These people can usually provide you with a few titles of important journals relevant to your field. Once you have these titles, you can locate a few issues of each journal in the Current Periodicals room, sit down for an hour or two, and look through the articles to see what is being talked about and what interests you.

## **Related Information: Online Searches and Databases**

One way of getting to the sources which will discuss topics current to your discipline is by searching the various computer databases and search engines related to that discipline. A database is simply an arrangement of information by way of similar subject matter. Some multidisciplinary scholarly databases include ResearchGate, Google Scholar, and OpenAlex. There are more specialized databases as well for almost every discipline. For example, if you were researching a topic for a Sociology essay on group behavior of Deadheads, you might go to the Social Sciences Index to find sources related to your topic.

For information on how to find relevant and useful databases, talk to the reference librarian in your library, or ask an expert in your field which databases they use regularly.

## **Related Information: Talking to Professionals in Your Discipline**

One of the most efficient ways to learn what topics are currently being discussed in your discipline is to talk to the experts: instructors and other professionals working within that discipline. We often forget that these people

can be valuable resources to us, and can point us toward books, journals, databases, and other sources of information that scholars in our various fields use often.

## Additional Resources

Harvard Extension School - '[Choosing a Topic](#)'

Purdue OWL - '[Choosing a Topic](#)'

USU Libraries - '[Choosing a Research Topic](#)'

York College - '[Choosing a Topic and Identifying Keywords](#)'

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