**Choosing a Topic Tutorial**

In this tutorial you will learn:

1. How to choose a topic that fits your assignment

2. Places to find ideas for topics

3. How to choose a topic with the correct scope

**Your Assignment**

Before you begin researching for your paper, you need to decide what your want to write about. The first step in determining your topic should be to look at the requirements of your assignment.

Your assignment requirements will tell you:

* Length of the paper
* Type of paper (persuasive, informative, etc.)
* Topic parameters
* Some professors include a list of approved topics

More about assignment requirements:

**Length of the paper**

How many pages or words do you have to write? Or perhaps there’s a specific word count you need to hit. For example, the history of the Roman Empire may be tough to tackle in 2 pages.

**Type of paper**

Are you supposed to write a particular kind of research paper? For example, a persuasive paper may require you to choose a side and back up your claims with recent evidence. Look closely at your assignment for guidelines about the type of paper you're expected to write. If you're not sure, ask your professor.

**Topic parameters**

Does your professor list a set of requirements for your topic? If you have to choose a historical event before 1865, don't write about the Vietnam War. Save that for next semester.

**List of Approved Topics**

Did your professor provide you with a list of approved topics to choose from? On the other hand, some professors will list topic they do not want to see. Make sure you avoid these. If your professor doesn’t ever want to read another paper about synchronized swimming, then just don’t go there.

Now that you have considered your assignment requirements you may have some idea of what topic you will choose.

Two other things to consider are:

* **Choose a topic that others have written about**. This will make finding information about the topic much easier. You’ll be able to base your own research on a foundation of work by other writers and scholars.
* **Choose a topic that interests you**. Don't write about types of types of soil in the Cretaceous period or the history of the coffee cup, unless these subjects interest you. If you have to write a psychology paper and Seasonal Affective Disorder doesn't do it for you, don't be sad. Bring in one of your own interests and make a connection. If you're a music major, you might write about the effects of music therapy on those diagnosed with SAD. In other words, find a “hook” that lets you make it your own.

At this point you may have a topic in mind. If not - here are some places you might look for topic ideas:

* Class readings or discussions
* Your hobbies or interests
* Consult an encyclopedia
* Search in the library catalog

Start with broad topic at first, you will learn how to narrow a broad topic in the next section.

More LOCATIONS where to find topic ideas:

**Class readings or discussions**

Was there something in class that you would like to learn more about? Maybe when you studied Ancient Egypt you wanted to learn more about mummification. Now is your chance to go back and explore this in more depth.

**Hobbies or discussions**

Find ways to integrate one of your outside interests and passions. Your perspective is unique. If you have a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, you might write about the positive effects of martial arts on children with ADHD for your psychology course.

**Consult an Encyclopedia**

Encyclopedias can give you a broad overview of a subject you’re considering. You’ll find short articles that lay out the major themes, key thinkers, and historical background of your topic. Any of the subtopics you see in an encyclopedia article could be the basis of a manageable research topic. Gale Virtual Reference Library, our online collection of eBook encyclopedias, can be a great starting place.

**Search in the Library Catalog**

Try a few keyword searches in the Library Catalog to get a sense of book, eBooks, DVDS, or streaming videos on your topic

**Brainstorming**

Now that you have a broad topic in mind, you can brainstorm related topics. There are many methods for brainstorming, some of which will work better than others for you and your topic. Here are two common brainstorming strategies. Or, if you have your own method, go ahead and use that!

**Mind Maps:**

Mind mapping is an informal way of generating ideas. Start with a single concept, then jot down any words and connections you can think of. Get messy. Draw lines and arrows to group ideas and define relationships.

**Charts:**

If you prefer a little more structure, try making a chart to organize your ideas. Use each column to pursue a specific angle or aspect of your topic. Then list the words or subtopics that come to mind. This is a great way to move from the general to the specific. You’ll see new topic ideas taking shape right before your eyes, as you mix and match concepts from each column. Some suggestions for column headings are general topics, who, where, when, and other factors.

**Here is an example of ways to organize your chart:**

General Subjects

* Military
* Politics
* Social impact
* Economy
* Morality

Where

* U.S.
* North
* South
* Texas

Who

* Yankees
* Confederates
* Slaves
* Abolitionists
* Lincoln

When

* 1860's
* Pre-war
* Reconstruction

Other related subjects:

* Cotton
* Emancipation Proclamation
* Juneteenth

**Broad and Narrow: refining your topic**

This section will show you how to choose a topic with the appropriate scope. The challenge is to find a topic that is neither too broad nor too narrow. If your topic is too broad, you may have trouble covering it well in your paper. If your topic is too narrow, you may have trouble finding information about your.

To **narrow your topic**, you can look at certain aspects, such as:

**Time**

Focus on a specific time period, like since 1990, this year, or the future. If you start with a broad topic like gun control, you can narrow it by focusing on current gun control issues.

**Place**

Focus on a specific region, like local social norms and values, international economic and political systems, or languages. So to narrow gun control by place, you may look at gun control efforts in the United Kingdom.

**Population**

Focus on a particular group of people, for example you could look at gender, age, occupation, ethnicity, or level of education. To narrow gun control by population you might look at gun access for felons after incarceration.

**Viewpoint**

A look at the social, legal, medical, ethical, biological, political etc. issues that affect a topic. To narrow gun control by viewpoint, you might look at the constitutionality of gun control laws.

Occasionally you may have a topic that is too narrow. In this case you might want to change something to make it less specific.

For example, Folk Musicians in Wimberley is too narrow, so you might want to change it too Folk Musicians of Central Texas.

**Review**

In this tutorial you have learned how to:

* Consult your assignment when choosing a topic
* Find ideas for topics by consulting library resources and your own interests
* Broaden or narrow a topic to fit the needs of your assignment

Now let’s test your understanding of these concepts in the quiz.

**Quiz**: **Choosing a Topic**

The following quiz consists of 10 questions.

Each question is worth 10 points. Choose the best answer and type the letter in the blank provided.

\_\_\_\_ 1. When approaching a writing assignment, the first step is to:

A. Start writing

B. Begin your research

C. Read and understand your assignment

D. Choose your topic

\_\_\_\_ 2. Which might be least helpful to consider when you are trying to choose a topic for your writing assignment?

A. Your own interests and hobbies

B. Your textbook and class notes

C. Your professor’s research interests

D. An encyclopedia

\_\_\_\_ 3. For a five page paper, how would you rate this topic? “Gun control efforts in Elgin”

A. Too broad

B. Too narrow

C. Just right

\_\_\_\_ 4. For a five page paper, how would you rate this topic? “History of agriculture”

A. Too broad

B. Too narrow

C. Just right

\_\_\_\_ 5. Your professor feels your topic on “Caves in Austin” is too narrow, what is your next step?

A. You will have to throw out the topic and start over

B. Write the paper anyway and hope the professor doesn’t notice your paper is too short

C. Consider ways you can expand your topic, such as using a larger geographic area

D. Change your margins and font size to make your paper longer

\_\_\_\_ 6. It is easier to write a paper with a very broad topic

A. True

B. False

\_\_\_\_ 7. When choosing a topic, it would be helpful to search the ACC Library catalog to:

A: Get a sense of books, eBooks, DVDs, and streaming videos available at ACC on your topic

B. Get a sense of what your instructor would like you to write about

C. Find contact information for a helpful librarian

D. Find keywords to help with your search

\_\_\_\_ 8. The ACC Library online resource Gale Virtual Reference Library is a great place to: (Check all that apply)

A. Learn more about the historical background of your topic

B. Find subtopics that could narrow your topic if it’s too broad

C. Get a broad overview of your topic as a good starting point

D. Search for books on your topic

E. Find an encyclopedia article to use as your only source

\_\_\_\_ 9. Mind mapping is one way of brainstorming to group topic ideas and define relationships.

A. True

B. False

\_\_\_\_ 10. When brainstorming about your topic using the chart method, which of these column headings would be most helpful?

A. Beginning, Middle, End

B. Ready, Set, Go

C. Where, Who, When

D. Set up, Confrontation, Resolution

If you are required to turn in this quiz to your professor, please print by selecting FILE => PRINT. If you are required to email the quiz to your professor or upload it to Blackboard, please choose FILE => SAVE.

Answer Key:

1. C

2. C

3. B

4. A

5. C

6. B

7. A

8. A, B, C

9. A

10. C