Narrow your topic

Ask questions about your subject and work with your assignment to choose an interesting, manageable topic.

For an overview of related key topics on planning a paper, visit the videos and quizzes in this tutorial.

Explore It

Many academic assignments that involve research writing will offer you the opportunity to choose a topic that interests you. For such assignments, it can be a challenge to come up with a topic that is both manageable (one you can address in appropriate depth) and interesting. But it is important to consider both concerns. Refining a topic allows you to think of an angle or an approach that will interest both you and your audience—one that will enable you to pose questions in your paper that you and your readers will find worthwhile. Also, you need to choose a topic that will lead you to a specific research question—one that you can answer with supporting evidence, data, and factual information.

Sample Topics: Too Broad
- distracted driving and smartphones
- hazards of childhood obesity

Sample Topics: Narrowed
- changing attitudes on distracted driving among young drivers with smartphones
- impact of food advertising on childhood obesity

Learn It

Analyze your assignment To choose an effective topic for a research paper, you should first consider any guidelines in your assignment. When you analyze a research assignment, your first step should be to consider carefully the words that specify what you are supposed to do: analyze? explain? compare? Read closely for these assignment words and be sure you’re clear about what your instructor expects your research paper to do. These keywords in assignments can mean different things in different disciplines.

Some assignments will specify the kinds of sources you must use or the kinds of research required. Where are you most likely to find these sources? Will you need time to conduct surveys, visit archives, or consult experts? Keep these concerns about where your research must take place in mind as you consider topics. Also consider the required length of the assignment, along with the deadline.

Consider your own interests Once you’ve considered what the assignment requires, take some time to think about your own interests. You can imagine that your research is a way for you to answer questions that you have about a topic. Consider subjects that you find compelling, and think about your own knowledge and the questions you have. Do you have personal interest or experience with the topic? Do you see problems that the topic presents to you or to others? How does the topic make you feel? What would you like to learn about this topic?

With any topic you’re considering, ask yourself whether you have the time, given your assignment, to do it justice. If the topic is too broad, you may not be able to address it adequately within your research project. To first arrive at a clearly identified topic, pose questions about it that will help you start describing and
explaining it. You can try writing out questions or talking them over with classmates or friends. Think about how you’d describe your topic to others and how you would explain your views on it. Try using the classic reporter’s questions—who, what, when, where, why, and how—to explain your topic.

**Narrow your topic** To narrow a topic that may still be too broad to be manageable consider limiting your focus. Consider how you can make the topic more interesting to you—and your audience. What would you and your readers like to know more about? Are there certain controversies related to your topic that would be of interest to readers? Formulate questions that you would like to answer about your topic—ones that your readers also want answered. Your research project will not answer all the questions you raise about a topic. But choosing a few related questions will help you focus your topic.

For example, one student—responding to a broad assignment to research the influence of technology on society—was considering writing about the effects of email on business productivity. He needed to formulate questions about the topic, such as these:

- What is the scope of email use in business?
- What is the history of email communication in the workplace?
- Why has email replaced other forms of business communication?
- What are the pros and cons of the reliance on email communication in business?
- If employees are more productive using email, should we be concerned about other, unintended effects of email use?

From this first set of questions, the student worked to focus on a few that particularly interested him.

As you narrow your topic, always keep in mind what kinds of sources you will need. If your main point would require supporting evidence that would be too time consuming to create or document, think of a different point that you will be able to support using the resources you have. The claims you make in your research paper should be supported by evidence and sources you can document within your deadlines. Your topic should be challenging and worthwhile, while also taking practical questions such as where you will find evidence into account.

**Use It**

Using a current research assignment, draft a list of three or four topics that interest you. Ask yourself the questions listed above and then choose one topic to explore and narrow. Keep a list of the questions you raised about your topic, and write a brief paragraph that explains why the topic will be of interest to you and to your readers.