



Generating a Paper Topic

A-State Online Writing Center

Selecting a paper topic isn't an easy task, but with guidance from your professor and by conducting focused research, you can choose a topic that interests you and add to its discourse through your own research and interpretations.

How to Select a Paper Topic

The Brainstorming Process

If you have free reign to develop a research topic, consider topics that intrigue you. Are you interested in certain social or political concerns or movements? Do you have concerns related to medical and health research? Do you hold a certain position on a subject and evaluate all sides of an argument? These are examples of questions you can ask yourself to generate ideas.

With that being said, there are hot button issues like abortion rights that are frequently discussed and should potentially be avoided unless you can approach the topic in a fresh manner. Discuss ideas with your professor beforehand so you can determine how you can thoughtfully frame an argument.

Defining a Focused Topic

When students select a topic that is too broad or encompasses too many factors, they run the risk of being unable to analyze a subject in-depth to develop novel points. This results in a disorganized paper that only scratches the surface of multiple topics rather than one.

Example: "How Global Warming Has Affected the Fishing Industry"

This is too broad because this industry exists around the world and should therefore be contained to a certain area to generate more nuanced research on conditions in a certain area. You would also need to consider the gravity of trying to evaluate centuries of human innovation and population growth. Instead, try focusing on a certain timeframe, culture, and/or population group when formulating topics.

Revised Example: "How Global Warming Has Affected the Fishing Industry on the American East Coast Since 1950"

This topic centralizes on specific points to develop a solid thesis statement in the introduction, but it's broad enough to potentially find ample literature and find unique threads.

It's also best to focus on a topic that isn't too specific or too recent, as there may not be enough research. For instance, analyzing how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected certain living conditions for seniors living in Boise, ID may be interesting and important, but you may not find enough substantiated research on the subject yet.

General Tips

1. Choose a topic you're interested in and that you can comprehend well. While this isn't a must, it's more helpful if the topic is relevant to your field of interest. Moreover, you need to be able to understand literature on the subject, so if it doesn't seem like you can digest material and report on it, it's best to brainstorm more.
2. Topics should be broad enough that there is adequate literature but focused enough to make the topic fresh and nuanced.
3. If there isn't substantial literature on the topic, discuss this concern with your professor. They may be able to help you find literature or recommend another topic.
4. Create a list of keywords associated with your topic. This will help narrow down points of interest and aid you when searching on databases or in search engines.
5. Throughout the research process, you may end up switching gears and focusing on another topic. This happens frequently and should be embraced if you feel like you can expand on another topic in further depth.
6. If your professor doesn't require approval, it's best to consult them anyway to ensure the topic meets class criteria.

Works Consulted

<https://www.umflint.edu/library/how-select-research-topic>
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/common_writing_assignments/research_papers/choosing_a_topic.html