

Introduction _____

It may seem obvious, but the first step in writing a research paper is selecting a topic. It may seem more obvious yet to suggest that you pick a topic of interest to you. Find a topic that captures your interest and that you care about and you will do a better job researching and writing about it!

Understanding the assignment__

Sometimes your instructor will assign a topic and sometimes the choice is yours. Even with an assigned topic, you usually have room to focus on an aspect that is interesting to you.

Make sure you understand the requirements of the assignment:

- how long should it be? (How much information do you need? How in-depth will your research be?)
- what kind of resources do you need? (scholarly articles, primary sources, audiovisuals, opinions, etc.)
- when is it due? (how much time do you have?)

Read and reread the assignment requirements provided by your instructor. If you do not understand them completely, ask your instructor for clarification.

Looking for Ideas _____

Selecting a topic to research can be a challenge. Sometimes the freedom to choose any topic can be the most daunting of all. Where can you go for ideas?

- **your own interests:** what do you do, think about, talk about outside of class? Do you have a personal interest, problem or decision to make?
- **course syllabus:** maybe there is a topic covered in class that piques your interest. It may be appropriate for more in-depth research.

- **your memory:** try to recall something you discussed previously in class. You tend to remember those things that capture your interest in some way.
- **other courses:** you may have another course for which you will have to do research. You may choose to research a topic that relates to that one. (Keep in mind, however, that turning in the same paper for more than one course is usually not acceptable).
- **current events:** has something in the news interested or enraged you?
- **current journals:** browse journals in a discipline or subject area to find hot topics
- **your professor:** sometimes talking with your professor is a good way to generate ideas for appropriate research topics.

Print & Online resources ____

General Topics:

- **Build-a-Guide**
<http://lib1.uwec.edu/research/index.asp> Provides a variety of research topic ideas as well as suggestions for researching them
- **Vital Speeches of the Day**
Browse current and past speeches of note. Find Vital Speeches by searching the library periodical list.
- **Hot Paper topics** (St. Ambrose University)
<http://library.sau.edu/bestinfo/Hot/hotindex.htm>
A list of paper topic ideas with links to selected websites

Current & Controversial Events

- **CQ Researcher**
<http://lib1.uwec.edu/journ.asp#CQR>
Reports on current and controversial issues, including sources of information and suggestions for further research
- **Documents in the News**(University of Michigan)



<http://www.lib.umich.edu/govdocs/docnews.html>:

Topics for current events research

- **New York Times Online – College**
<http://www.nytimes.com/college/>
Current events geared toward the interests of college students and faculty, arranged by subject area
- **Editorials on File** Reference Collection
Z6944.E4 E44
Collection of newspaper editorials covering a broad range of subjects. This can be a useful resource for finding controversial topics.
- **Deatabase**
<http://www.debatabase.org/home.asp>
Searchable database of controversial topics with arguments for and against
- **Public Agenda Online**
<http://www.publicagenda.org/>
Nonpartisan guides to a wealth of public policy issues and public opinion

Specialized Topics:

- **Annual Reviews**
Browse articles reviewing recent advances in the biomedical, physical or social sciences
<http://lib1.uwec.edu/journ.asp#ANNREV>
- **America: History & Life** (North and South America)
<http://lib1.uwec.edu/journ.asp#AHLOD>
Historical Abstracts (outside the Americas)
<http://lib1.uwec.edu/journ.asp#HAOD>
These ABC-CLIO databases include a link to Clio Notes, which outline important historic events and follow up with a series of research topic suggestions.

Still can't think of anything?

The **Purdue Online Writing Lab** provides many helpful ideas for writing and research:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>

Narrowing a topic

Once you've identified a general topic you'd like to research, the next step is to turn it into a manageable question. Consider the following criteria in focusing your research topic:

- **Time:** am I interested in my topic for a specific time period?
- **Place:** am I interested in a particular geographic region?
- **People:** am I interested in a particular person or group of people related to my topic?
- **Event or aspect:** is there a specific event or aspect of my topic on which I want to focus?

Combine these criteria to formulate your topic into a question. The resulting question may or may not be researchable. As you look for information on your research question, you may find that you need to broaden, narrow or delete one or more of the four criteria

Reference librarians are available to assist you in identifying potential research topics as well as in finding information on a chosen topic. Just ask at the reference desk or click **ASK US** on any library Web page.

