

# How to Come Up With a Project Topic

It's time. You've known about it. You may have dreaded it. But it's time. You need to come up with a project topic.

A few lucky graduate students find a project topic early in their graduate work, and keep a notebook going with ideas and tips for future research related to that topic. But most are not ready to select a specific topic until the time comes to write the project.

You should look at this as an exciting moment. Writing a project affords you the opportunity to display your mastery of the field of study in which you have invested years, as well as a chance to contribute to the body of knowledge on a specific subject within that field. Yes, many students see coming up with a project topic as a daunting task, but it doesn't have to be. When you understand what is expected as you select a topic for your project and discover the steps necessary to find one, it may not seem so difficult. It may even be fun. Okay, perhaps that's a bit of a stretch. But maybe in retrospect you will consider the experience more enjoyable than it seemed at the time you were caught in the maws of the project.

Choosing a project topic is a rite of passage in the world of academia. A well-chosen project topic can lead to research questions that fuel your academic interests for years to come. At the very least, topics can be seen as occasions for making your writing relevant and meaningful to your own personal and academic concerns.

Don't panic. We promise this process won't be so bad. Here are some tips to get you brainstorming:

## How to Choose Project Topic Criteria

A project is an idea or theory that is expressed as a statement, a contention for which evidence is gathered and discussed logically. One of the most important concerns in choosing a project topic is that the topic speaks to an area of current or future demand. A good project topic is a general idea that is in need of development, verification or refutation. Your project topic should be of interest to you, your advisor, and the research community. If it is not, it may be difficult to stay motivated or to "sell" the idea. When searching for a topic, remember that your project should attempt to solve a

real problem and should contain solid theoretical work, as well as empirical results. It should be both connected to existing research and centered on a meaningful topic.

Choose a narrow, well-defined topic that branches out in a new direction. Try not to pick a topic that is too out-there, as it will be hard to generate interest in your project. Marketability is subject to change, so don't feel obligated to choose a project topic that reflects the latest craze in your field. You want a project topic that will hook the attention of others, as well as maintain your own attention. Your project topic should relate to what you've been studying and should stand up to scrutiny. Remember, part of writing a project is having to defend it later. Project topics need to be easily manageable given factors such as your geographic area and the resources and facilities available to you. The size of your project topic can be tricky; you want it to be manageable but not so narrow that you will be limited while researching.

As you develop your project topic, always factor in your interests, strengths, and weaknesses. You should also bear in mind the readers' expectations, as well as the assignment restrictions. Try to develop two or three possible topics in case you encounter a lack of supporting information. You don't have to commit to just one idea at the beginning of the process. You can bring your ideas to your advisor, who will help you determine which one is the most promising. If your advisor is enthusiastic about your topic, he or she will be that much more invested in helping and supporting you.

## Project Topic Generation or How to come up with a Project Topic!

It can be very helpful to choose a broad subject area at first. As you read and research that subject area, you will narrow down toward a project topic. Your advisor can help you narrow it even further if you run into trouble. Organization is key to the entire project process, so get organized early on to reduce your stress levels. As you search for your project topic, use the materials from your coursework, such as texts, notes and papers. Advice from your instructors and advisor is priceless during this process. You will also find a wealth of resources at your fingertips at your school and local libraries. And don't discount your own knowledge - you have studied hard through the years and have learned a great deal.

Begin by brainstorming and doing some free-writing exercises to get your mind moving in the right direction. Talk to others about your ideas and research your topics to determine the potential availability of information about each one. Make an outline to group your ideas and locate the crux of argument or problem on which you would like to focus. Even if you are not required to do so, it can be beneficial to write up a project proposal; it can help you define problems, outline possible solutions, and identify evaluation criteria. You can show the proposal to your advisor and colleagues for feedback.

Maintaining some sort of journal can be helpful in tracking your ideas for topics. You can keep notes in the journal as you research possible topics and write down questions to which you would like to find answers. It is important to have an awareness of ongoing and directly related research. However, don't spend too much time reading and studying current research, as new work is constantly being published. You might even consider setting up interviews (in person, by telephone or, less effectively, via e-mail) with leading figures in your field who have researched and written material relevant to your chosen topic. Graduate students do not often give thought to arranging such interviews, but they can be an effective complement to the research you are conducting. You can cite your interviews just as you would a passage from some article you've used as background to your own work.

## Troubleshooting your Project Ideas & Subject

If you discover that another academic has written a project on a topic similar to your own, don't stress out. Carefully read the material to gain an understanding of what it is that the prior project has accomplished and consider ways your project might further develop the topic or might approach the topic from a totally different perspective. You are likely to find that the former project is not the same as the one you are considering after all. To be sure, show the competing project to your advisor; he or she can give you indispensable advice. If you discover that another graduate student is writing a project on the same topic you've chosen, you could also consider contacting that author to get an even better idea of whether your ideas overlap. (Be careful not to give away too much of your own thinking on the topic as you conduct this discussion.)