



J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College Libraries

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How to Refine, Narrow, or Broaden a Topic

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How to Choose and Refine Your Topic

Your first step towards a successful research endeavor is to choose a manageable topic. A manageable topic should be:

- **Interesting to you.** It should be a topic that you want to know more about and can hold your interest and attention to the end of your research paper or assignment.
- **Not too broad.** A topic that is too broad will retrieve way too much information. For example, you can write a multivolume encyclopedia set on a broad topic such as “health.”
- **Not too narrow** A topic that is too narrow may retrieve no or very few published documents. If the topic is too specific or new, it will be difficult finding enough information to write even a several page paper.
- **Well defined and specific.** Always try to state your topic as a question or sentence, which becomes the **thesis statement**. This will help you clarify your thoughts and remain focused.

How to Narrow Your Topic

Example: “I am thinking of doing a paper on health.”

Define your topic by asking the following questions:

- When you think of this broad topic, what **specific issues** interest you – *careers in health care, specific mental disorders or diseases, the state of health care in the United States*? All of these subtopics are facets of the much broader topic – *health*.
- What **aspects** of your topic interest you: *business, history, legal, physical, psychological, social* etc.?
- What **time period** do you want to cover?
- Do you want to focus on a **geographic region** or **population**?
- **What kind of information** do you need? (e.g., a brief summary or a lengthy explanation; periodical articles or books; statistics)

Sample Topic – Narrowing Chart:

General Topic:	health
Facets of Topic:	autism, cancer, depression, diabetes, eating disorders , health care
Aspects:	business, history, legal, physical, psychological, social
Time Span:	1990s; current
Population or Place (Demographics):	African Americans, Hispanics, men, women, teenagers, United States
Narrowed Research Question:	Does the media’s portrayal of the ideal female body contribute to eating disorders in women?

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How to Broaden Your Topic

Example: “I am thinking of doing a paper on how fishing in the James River in Richmond, VA has affected the smallmouth bass population.”

This topic as stated is seeking to answer a question for which there may be no answer yet – there may be no or very little research or studies that have been conducted on this topic. How can this be turned into a more manageable topic?

Hint: Look for parallels and opportunities for broader associations:

- Rather than concentrate on a specific species of fish, examine more broad fish populations such as *freshwater fish* or *saltwater fish*.
- Examine larger geographic regions that are affected such as the *United States*.
- Identify the people or groups that encompass this topic such as *fishermen* or *fish & wildlife government departments*.
- Brainstorm for other issues related to this topic such as *fishery management*, *fishery regulations*, *fishing licenses*, *fish stocking*, etc.

Sample Topic – Broadening Chart:

Specific Topic:	How has fishing in the James River in Richmond, VA affected the smallmouth bass population?
Alternate focus:	freshwater fish, saltwater fish
Alternate Place:	Southeastern United States, United States, rivers, oceans
Brainstorm Focus on: Person or Group:	fishermen, fish & wildlife government departments
Brainstorm Focus on: Event or Aspect:	fishery management, fishery regulations, fishing licenses, fish stocking
Broadened Research Question	How has government fishing regulations in the United States affected the freshwater fish population?

Adapted from: *How to Narrow or Broaden Your Topic*, UCLA Library:

http://www2.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/11605_11640.cfm