



J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College Libraries

Your first stop for information and research needs!

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 “technology.”
- **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’m thinking of doing a paper on technology.”

Define your topic by asking the following questions:

- When you **think** of this topic, what do you **picture** – the Internet, computer, automobiles, pre-historic tools, washing machines? All of these inventions are facets of the broad topic – technology.
- What **do** you know about technology? What **don't** you know?
- What **aspects** of your topic interest you: historical, sociological, psychological, mechanical, etc.?
- What **time period** do you want to cover?
- Do you want to focus on a **geographic region**?
- **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:	Technology
Facets of Topic:	automobiles; cellular phones; wireless technology; text messaging; social networking; GPS systems
Aspects:	legal; psychological; social
Time Span:	1990s; current
Place:	United States; urban; rural; China
Narrowed Research Question:	Should cell phones be banned while driving?

How to Broaden Your Topic

Example: "I'm thinking of doing a paper on how the present war in Iraq is affecting Iraqis in the U.S. workforce."

This topic as stated is seeking to answer a question for which there may be no answer yet -- more scientific and long-term research may need to be done. How can this be turned into a more manageable topic?

Hint: Look for parallels and opportunities for broader associations:

- Examine other cultural groups in America that have emigrated from countries at war with the U.S.
- Think broadly about prejudice and the workplace.
- Identify the people or groups that encompass this topic: Iraqi immigrants; the U.S. government; Employers; Employees
- What other issues are involved in this topic? Such as, how is life in general for Iraqis in the United States?

Sample Topic – Broadening Chart:

Specific Topic:	How has the present war in Iraq affected Iraqis in the U.S. workforce?
Alternate focus:	Other immigrants whose country of origin may be at war with the U.S.; How Iraqis in general are managing in the U.S.; History of this issue with other cultural groups
Alternate Place:	A single country or group of European countries
Brainstorm Focus on: Person or Group:	Immigrants from enemy countries vs. employers
Brainstorm Focus on: Event or Aspect:	Salaries; hiring policies, abuse in the workplace; 20 th century
Broadened Research Question	During the past century in the American workplace, what obstacles have been faced by immigrants from a country at war with the United States?

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

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