

NARROWING YOUR TOPIC

Choosing a topic is the first step to writing an essay and sets the course of the writing process. A topic that is too broad can leave you trudging through excessive information and force you to write superficially about a topic to stay within a word count. These tips are crafted for papers of around 600-1200 words.

TIP: Academic Coaching can help you at any part of the writing process, even if you are choosing a topic!

HOW TO KNOW IF YOUR TOPIC IS TOO BROAD

1. **Does your topic answer the 4 W's?** A narrow topic should answer most of the following:

Who – Does it focus on a specific person or group of people?

Ex. Booker T. Washington, Christians, or Regent University students

What – Does it address a specific subject?

Ex. Stress levels, cultural impact, or eating habits

When – Does it cover a specific time period?

Ex. During WWII, the Renaissance period, or the 1970's

Where – Does it focus on a specific place?

Ex. The United States, New Mexico, or Boston

NOTE: Some topics may not naturally require an answer to one of these questions. For example, a literary analysis does not necessarily need to cover a specific time.

2. **Would a research question on this topic be too vague?** Practice writing a research question for your topic and use this as a litmus test. Ask yourself how much content you would have to write about in order to answer that question.

✗ What impact did Native Americans have?

This research question is too broad because it addresses a place (America) and a group (Native Americans) but does not address any time period or subject. To fully answer this research question, you would have to catalog *all* the impacts that Native Americans have had for the *entire* time that they have inhabited the Americas.

✓ How did Native Americans impact farming in colonial America?

This question narrows the previous question to focus on a specific time period (colonial America) and a specific subject (farming).

NOTE: Some answers to the 4 W's will be implied. Since the group in the first example is Native Americans, you can presume that the place is America, and since the time period in the second question is colonial America, you can presume that the place is North America specifically.

3. **Is your topic similar in scope to others who have written on it?** Do a quick search on a library database and notice whether the topics of the articles that you see are much narrower than yours. Academic journal articles tend to be quite narrow and similar in length to most research papers. Consider also browsing book titles to see examples of topics that are **too broad** for your academic paper.

EXAMPLES OF NARROWED TOPICS

TOO-BROAD TOPIC	NARROWED TOPICS
Checks and Balances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How checks on Congress have prevented it from gaining too much power throughout American history - Why the framers of the Constitution instituted checks and balances between the branches - If checks and balances can be implemented in India's government today
Women's rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How WWII accelerated the women's rights movement in America - Jane Addams's impact on women's education in early 20th Century America - How the sexual revolution of the 1960s slowed the American women's rights movement
Shakespeare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> addresses prejudice - The inaccuracy of modern remakes of Shakespeare's plots - How <i>A Comedy of Errors</i> exemplifies Shakespeare's comedic formula
Advertisements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The impact of TV Advertisements on buying habits in America today - The danger of constant advertisements fed to Americans today - How Coca-Cola's U.S. marketing strategy has changed from its debut to today

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