![Sophia logo]

Choosing a Manageable Research Topic

by Sophia

☰ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the difference between suitable and unsuitable topics for academic research essays and how to begin exploring those topics further. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

📋 BEFORE YOU START

Take a few minutes to watch this **video** from the John M. Pfau Library at California State University - San Bernardino. This video will help you visualize the process of selecting an appropriate research topic. The end of the video contains a few "test yourself" questions. Consider *why* the answers are what they are as you watch.

1. Overly Broad or Narrow Topics

A great topic will set you up for a strong essay by being focused and rich, falling in the sweet spot between broad and narrow.

Broad simply means too big; narrow means too small. The specifics of those sizes will depend somewhat on the assignment's parameters, such as its length, focus, purpose, etc.

However, if you can spot broad and narrow topics, you can find your place between the two extremes. Before you commit to a topic, do some prewriting to see how much content you generate about the proposed topic.

If you don't have much to say, you might have a topic that's too narrow. If you have too much, then you might have a topic that's too broad.

2. Prewriting Strategies

The term **prewriting** conjures up a lot of interesting activities and practices. You've probably tried many different prewriting strategies in the past and may have a good idea of what works for you and what doesn't.

Keep in mind, however, that the kind of writing project you're working on can impact how effective a particular technique is to use in a given situation.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Prewriting

An activity or a set of activities that writers use to generate ideas for writing projects.

2a. Freewriting

Freewriting involves setting a goal for a short amount of time (5 minutes or 10 minutes are good options) to write anything that comes to mind about a topic.

The goal is to not worry about what comes out of your pen or keyboard. Instead, just free your mind to make associations as it wishes. This strategy is amazingly productive for rich ideas, and it's nice not to have to worry about spelling and grammar while you do it.

2b. Listing

If you're a list-maker by nature, there's no reason not to harness that for academic writing purposes. You can simply jot down notes about major ideas related to the subject you're working with.

This also works well with a time limit, such as 10 minutes. After you've had time to reflect on your list, you can rearrange it in hierarchical order, and create a basic outline quite easily.

2c. Clustering

Also known as "mapping," clustering is a more visual form of brainstorming. It involves coming up with topic ideas and drawing lines to connect those ideas to sub-categories and other related concepts.

You can end up with a quite extensive "bubble cloud" as a result. This also works well with a 10-minute time limit.

2d. Questioning

In the early stages of the writing process, the way to find answers is simply to ask questions.

When you have a topic in mind, asking and answering questions about it is a good way to figure out the directions your writing might take.

📋 SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that finding a good research topic involves trimming down **overly broad topics** or expanding on **overly narrow topics**. When trying to develop ideas for a topic, there are several **prewriting strategies** that can be helpful: **freewriting**, **listing**, **clustering**, and **questioning**. The effectiveness of the strategy you use often depends on the nature of the writing project.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Prewriting Strategies" tutorial.

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