

Defining Your Essay Topic

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers essay topics—figuring out which essay topics are too broad, which are too narrow, and which ones are just right. Discussion includes:

1. Defining Topic Scope

1a. Overly Broad Topics

1b. Overly Narrow Topics

2. Determining a Topic from a Prompt

1. Defining Topic Scope

Have you ever sat down to write an assignment, but then realized you had no clue what to focus on? Today's lesson is going to help you practice selecting appropriate **topics** that meet your needs for any assignment.

First, it's important to know that a topic is the controlling idea or focus of an essay or other writing project. 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, its length, its focus, its purpose, et cetera.

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

Broad	Narrow
too much content	not enough content
lacks specifics	too specific

Either way, you can expand or contract that topic as needed before you begin writing your essay.

**TERM TO KNOW****Topic**

The controlling idea or focus of an essay or other writing project.

1a. Overly Broad Topics

A topic that is too broad will feature too much content, so much that you couldn't hope to possibly fit it all into one paper. You'll notice that broad topics lack specifics and won't immediately present the reader with useful information.

**TRY IT**

Look at the following essay topic, and see if you can decide where it falls on the spectrum:

The history of dogs.

A good clue is that it seems like the title of a really long reference book; you can tell that it's just too broad. Think about what this topic demands. You'd need to start with the prehistory of dogs when they were still wolves. Then you'd need to explain how wolves were domesticated to become early dogs.

Would you be looking at that from a biological perspective or an anthropological one? The topic doesn't say, so you'd have to assume both. Then you'd need to discuss how dogs ended up all over the world and in hundreds of different breeds in different sizes. Which breeds would you focus on? Where would you end this history? What kinds of roles and jobs of dogs would you look at? This topic is just too broad.

But if you wanted to narrow it down, it might be wise to pick one of these questions and focus in on it more specifically. You could go from the history of dogs, to dog breeds, to dogs as pets, to the difference between working dogs and pets. That's still a big topic, but it's much more focused than the whole history.

1b. Overly Narrow Topics

Conversely, a topic that is too narrow won't feature enough content; you'll be finished covering the whole topic way too soon. You'll notice that narrow topics are so specific that you really don't have enough to say to fill in a whole essay.

**TRY IT**

Look at the following essay topic, and see if you can decide where it falls on the spectrum:

Recent additions to the American Kennel Club breed list that have become popular in North America.

This is at the other end. When you narrowed down from the history of dogs, you stopped before you got to

a topic this specific. That's one clue that this might be too narrow. But how else might you know? Imagine doing a quick free-write of what you'd need to discuss in this essay.

You'd need to consider what the AKC is, what these recent additions are that this topic is discussing, and which ones have become popular in North America. That's just three little points; there's not too much to say. This shows not only how narrow this topic is, but how free-writing or brainstorming about a topic can help you find out if it's too narrow.

If you were going to broaden this topic, you could ask what the controversy or point-of-interest is. Why did you start with this topic in the first place? Maybe you're interested in how the AKC decides which breeds constitute a new addition. That might be a more interesting question that could point you towards a more appropriate topic.

Maybe there's some debate over whether the AKC's rules are fair and inclusive. That might be a good point of contact that could broaden this to debates about AKC policies for admitting new breeds.

Or you could go another route. If this is too narrowly focused on North America, you could broaden the scope to the whole world and think about an international perspective. Maybe there is an international counterpart to the AKC. This topic could then be international kennel club regulations and how they compare to the AKC.

Either way, you'd be keeping the core interests the same, but expanding the focus to include more issues.

2. Determining a Topic from a Prompt

In those two cases, the author got to choose a topic based solely on personal interest. But in many classes, you will get an assignment and have to work from that prompt.

There are thus some specific steps you can take to ensure you still pick an appropriate topic when given a prompt.



STEP BY STEP

1. When choosing a topic from an instructor's prompt, the first and possibly most important thing to do is to carefully read the assignment and ask any questions you might have.
2. Once you know what you're meant to write—all the assignments, expectations, and requirements—then you can start from a strong place. You might take the prompt and do some prewriting, using a method such as clustering, listing, or free-writing about the prompt to see if you find anything compelling or anything that sparks your interest.
3. After that, you're ready to work through the stages of the writing process. As you draft, revise, and edit, think often about the connections to the prompt in order to catch yourself if you're veering off topic.

Sometimes, the prompt will be a question. In those cases, the prewriting stage would be a good time to try answering it in a few ways and seeing what happens. Other times, the prompt will be a broader topic, so you can practice narrowing it to a precise one.

Once you have an idea about how your beliefs and opinions fit within this topic, you can work on drafting a thesis statement. This should not merely restate the assignment's prompts in your own words. If you've done your work brainstorming, you should have a unique approach to the topic that reflects your interest.

IN CONTEXT

Consider the following prompt:

Write a one-page essay describing a skill necessary for college success.

To decide on a topic, you'd first check the assignment parameters, as those will tell you how to craft your topic. How long is this meant to be? One page. That says that this will be pretty brief, and thus you'll want a fairly narrow topic.

This prompt also specifically instructs you to think about a skill that will help ensure college success. Therefore, you know that this assignment will be descriptive and informative.



TRY IT

Here are a few options for topics based on that prompt. Read them and decide which one you think is best.

1. *Writing.*
2. *Knowing the difference between a comma splice and the correct use of a comma.*
3. *Knowing the different modes of writing*

Based on what you've learned so far, you can probably tell that "Knowing the different modes of writing" is the best choice. This topic is sufficiently focused on one element of writing, so the author of this paper will have enough detail to give, but not too much ground to cover.

"Knowing the difference between a comma splice and the correct use of a comma" is too narrow. There's only one thing to explain—the difference between a comma splice and the correct use of a comma. That's not a lot of material to work with.

And "Writing" is way too broad. Writing is a huge subject. Does this author mean the physical act of forming words with a pencil or something more specific? You just don't know; this is too vague and unfocused to give you a clear path to a one-page paper.



SUMMARY

In this tutorial, you learned about the importance of **defining the scope of an essay topic**. When you're writing, you want to make sure that your topic is neither too broad nor too narrow.

You then learned how to narrow down **overly broad topics** by choosing a specific question to focus on, as well as how to broaden **overly narrow topics** by considering other related aspects that might interest you.

Finally, you learned how to **determine a topic from a prompt**, which is a specific assignment that your instructor may give you. It's important to return to the prompt throughout the writing process to ensure that you are meeting the parameters of the assignment.

Good luck!

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TERMS TO KNOW

Topic

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