

How to Narrow or Broaden Your Research Topic

Be prepared to be flexible with your topic idea!

- If it is too broad or vague you will find too much information and will need to narrow the focus.
- If it is too specific or specialized or new, it will be difficult finding enough information to write your paper this quarter. In that case, you will need to broaden your idea.

How to Narrow Your Topic

Example: I'm thinking of doing a paper on "fashion." This topic could develop in many different ways.

Hint: Ask Yourself Questions About Your Topic:

- What do you know about it? What don't you know?
- What aspects of your topic interest you: historical, sociological, psychological, etc.?
- What time period do you want to cover?
- On what geographic region do you want to focus?
- What kind of information do you need?
 - A brief summary or a lengthy explanation?
 - Periodical articles, books, essays, encyclopedia articles?
 - Statistics?

Sample Topic Narrowing Chart:

General Topic:	Fashion
Time span:	1920s
Place:	US; urban; big cities (not rural)
Person or group:	youth; college age
Event or Aspects:	sexual attitudes; behavior; sociological

How to Broaden Your Topic

Example: I'm thinking of doing a paper on "whether genetically altered soybeans are safe for consumers."

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 1: Look for parallels and opportunities for broader associations:

- Could you examine other bioengineered foods, in addition to soybeans?

- Could you think broadly about safety concerns and issues -- what might these be?
- Who are the key players in this controversy? Consumer activists? The FDA? Scientists?
- What other issues are involved in this topic? Such as, how should be foods be labeled?

Hint 2: Brainstorm! (and ask a reference librarian!)

Sample Topic Broadening Chart:

Specific Topic: Are genetically altered soybeans safe for consumers?

Alternate Focus: bioengineered or genetically altered foods

Alternate Place: general: US, Europe

Brainstorm Focus on: consumer advocates vs FDA and scientists

Person or Group:

Brainstorm Focus on: labeling foods; regulations

Event or Aspect:

modified from: http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/11605_11640.cfm