

Research Papers: Narrowing your Research Topic

Once you have chosen a broad topic for your research paper, narrow your focus on that topic to make a more precise point. Narrowing the focus of your topic will limit your page count, make your supporting information specific, and make your main point easier to understand. Below are a few steps that may help you narrow your topic:

A. Decide if Your Topic Needs to Be More Narrow

1. Consider the required length of your research paper.

Ask yourself: "Can I cover this topic in the required number of pages or words?"

- For example, if the topic you have chosen for a two to three page paper is "illegal immigration," you need to narrow your topic. You could focus on whether or not illegal immigrants should receive healthcare, whether or not the children of illegal immigrants should be able to attend schools, or whether or not illegal immigrants should be deported if they are caught while reporting a crime.

2. Consider the number of possible sources you found during your preliminary research. Too many possible sources could indicate you should limit your topic.

- For example, if the assignment requires that you consult and list six to eight reference sources, and you find forty books and one thousand online articles related to your topic, you might need to make your topic more specific. As you limit your topic, your number of sources should become more limited as well. You should still probably have more possible sources than you need.

B. Narrow the Scope of Your Topic

1. As you attempt to limit your focus, ask yourself questions that pick apart the content of the broad topic. This way, you may find a smaller chunk (narrow topic) of the larger whole (broad topic) to work with.

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What part of this topic interests me the most?
- Is there a certain perspective from which I want to view this topic?
- Would I like to learn more about a specific issue concerning this topic?

2. Another way to narrow your topic is to do so in gradual steps. Start with your broad topic, go through a sequence of increasingly specific questions about it, and then do the same for each of the answers to your questions.

Q: What is my broad topic?

A: Philosophy

Q: What aspect of philosophy am I interested in?

A: Important philosophers

Q: Who is one important philosopher I can focus on?

A: Rene Descartes

Q: What information about this philosopher can I research and discuss in my paper?

A: Descartes' view on the human self

For More Help:

- After you narrow your research topic, you need to develop a working thesis.
- See the WRL Center handout **Developing a Working Thesis**.
- Come to the WRL workshop on **Thesis Statements**.