

Advanced Writing Podcast One Script Narrowing Your Topic

Finding information for a project, research paper, or for any other purpose can be a daunting task, but with a few tricks and tips the whole process is much easier.

In all my years as a librarian I've found that the number one thing that causes people problems with research is that the question they are trying to answer is too broad.

When you start the research process it is okay to have a broad idea of what you want to do, but when you really get ready to search in the library databases you have to have a narrow topic. Having a narrow topic helps you in three ways:

First, a narrow topic will limit the amount of information you get. I know everyone at one time or another has searched Google and retrieved millions of hits. This is just how it is today, it is hardly ever a case of too little information it is almost always a case of too much information. So to limit the amount of information you get you must have a narrow topic. This allows you to focus your searches in the computer to get just what you want. With a general topic you are always going to get too much and it will be overwhelming.

Second, a narrow topic will get you the stuff you need. Even though you may be a dedicated student who faithfully looks at every single one of any large number of items you retrieve with a search, most of the time we just don't have the time to really look at everything. So not only will a narrow search limit the numbers of things you get, a good search on a narrow topic will retrieve items that are focused on your topic so you won't have lots of things to go through that are not relevant. In essence narrow searches are relevant searches.

Lastly, a narrow topic will give you a better paper. The reality is you cannot cover the world in ten to twelve pages. While you may panic when looking at an assignment that asks you to write ten pages the reality is that while a general topic may help you fill space it will not help you to fill space well. To write a good paper you have to cover everything, you have to give good arguments, you have to say what people have said, and you have to give your own ideas. Only a narrow topic will allow you to cover everything accurately and well. You may have to trust me on this, but do trust me, general topics don't make for good papers.

Now the problem is how do you know if your topic is narrow enough? My first advice is that most people don't have narrow topics so everyone can narrow. My second bit of advice is that to determine if your topic is narrow enough ask yourself those quintessential journalist questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why and How? If you have not answered all those questions in your topic then your topic is not narrow enough.

So ask yourself:

Who? -- Who am I talking about? What groups or types of people are involved?

What? -- What am I going to talk about? What one particular aspect of this topic am I interested in?

When? -- When does my topic take place? Am I going to look at historical items or just current ones?

Where? -- Where does my topic take place? Is there a certain location I am going to look at?
Why? -- Why am I trying to answer this question? Why does this question need an answer?
How? -- How am I going to focus my topic? Am I writing a persuasive paper or just looking at a topic to give information?

While you may not know the answers to these questions right up front it is necessary to figure them out as you go along. Ultimately the answers to these questions will help you focus in on a specific topic.

For example *How can teachers help handicapped students?* is too broad. I have not answered What types of help I'm going to talk about, nor have I talked about a specific type of handicap, nor have I decided where or when this help is going to take place. Once I figure those things out I come up with my narrow topic --- *"How can teachers use cooperative learning techniques in an inclusive classroom to better serve the learning styles of learning disabled students?"*

So the first step in the research process is to narrow your topic. I hope my advice has helped but if you need more help in answering the questions try looking up your topic in the print encyclopedias in the social science/education reference collections on level one or try the Gale Virtual Reference Library that you can connect to from the library homepage. If you still have more questions, ask your professor to help or ask a librarian. We're here to help at any stage of the research processes so don't hesitate to ask.