

Narrowing a Topic

After you have used brainstorming exercises to select a topic, your next step is to narrow that topic to a manageable focus. For example, you may be interested in preserving the environment. To fully cover this topic would require that you write a book, or several books. So you will narrow your topic to a manageable size by thinking about what aspects environmental preservation you will write about. As you narrow your topic, consider many of the same things as you did when you selected your broad topic:

- **The requirements of the assignment**
 - What guidelines has your instructor set for topic selection?
 - What type of paper is this? A narrative or reflective paper may require that you narrow your topic to something you have personal experience with. An argument paper will require that your topic be something that reasonable people would disagree about.
 - What are the content and length requirements? Your objective is to narrow your topic to a focus and size that enables you to provide in-depth, *detailed* coverage of the topic within the page requirements of the assignment.
- **Your personal interests**
 - You will be spending a lot of time with this topic. Make sure that this is something that genuinely interests you. This will make the research and writing process more enjoyable, and the finished work will reflect your sincerity and conviction.
 - Ask yourself *why* you choose this topic. If your broad topic is the environment, think about what aspects of the environment you most care about. Are you most interested in conservation of fish and game, or endangered species? Are you most concerned about preservation of wetlands, forests, oceans, or deserts? Are there conservation measures or environmentally friendly technologies that particularly interest you?
- **Audience and purpose**
 - What aspects of the topic would most be most interesting and important to your audience?
 - What aspects of the topic would be new to the audience? Avoid tired topics that your audience and your instructor are already thoroughly familiar with. For example, littering is certainly an environmental concern, but it is likely that your audience has been reading papers or hearing speeches about litter since they were in grade school.

How to tell if your topic is too broad or too narrow

- **The number of ideas and points you plan to cover**

When you have narrowed your topic in mind and have done some preliminary research, do a rough outline or list of key points.

If you have a number of unrelated **ideas**, your topic may still be too broad. For example, conservation of wetlands and conservation of rainforests may be unrelated.

Even if your ideas are related to each other, if you have too many **key points** to support your ideas, your topic may be too broad. You should have a few key points (perhaps three to six, depending on the length of your paper) and you have ample space to present details and examples for each of those points.

In contrast, if you have only one or two key ideas, and not much detail to support those ideas, your topic might be too narrow.

- **The availability of high quality sources**

As you do your research, if your key word search turns up hundreds of high quality sources on your topic, your topic may be too broad. If you can't find enough information about your topic, it may be too narrow.

As you narrow your topic, be flexible

Remember that writing is a recursive process in which you make discoveries, develop new ideas, and change things as you conduct research and write. You may want to go back to your brainstorming exercises for assistance in further refining your topic and key points.

Additional Resources:

[“The Writing Process, Stage 2: Narrowing Down the Topic,”](#) by the Academic Writing Help Centre, University of Ottawa

[“Narrowing Your Topic,”](#) Colorado State University Writing Studio