

# How to Choose a Topic

A good topic to focus your paper on will have a couple of key characteristics:

## I. Something New — Make sure your topic is interesting and worth writing about.

**Don't repeat something scholars have already answered.**

**Example:** A question like, "Should women have the right to vote?" has already been answered, so it doesn't make a strong topic. Instead, try to examine a new angle: "What rhetorical strategies did suffragettes use to win the right to vote?"

**Don't choose a question too obvious or too broad to answer.**

**Example:** A question like, "What policies can address economic disparities in America?" is too broad. Try to be more specific: "What new policies can address the health care disparities in rural America?"

**Choose a significant question.**

**Example:** Instead of a simple question like, "What narrative layers does Chaucer use in *Troilus and Criseyde*," go deeper: "What does Chaucer use the multiple narrative layers in *Troilus and Criseyde* to communicate?"

## II. Clearly Focused — The concept of your paper should pose and clearly answer an interesting question.

**Don't be vague.**

**Example:** Instead of something vague like, "Low income workers and alcohol consumption," ask a specific question that's worth finding the answer to: "What is the relationship between income level and alcohol consumption?"

**Don't try to cover too many ideas.**

**Example:** A question like, "How does Toni Morrison use imagery, symbolism, names, and hyperbole in *Song of Solomon*?" covers too many areas. Choose a more manageable question: "How does Toni Morrison use symbolism and names in *Song of Solomon*?"

## III. Interesting to you, personally — You don't want to get bored of your topic before you're done.

So how do you find a good topic that has all of these characteristics?

### 1. Understand the prompt

Spend some time really looking at your prompt. Knowing what the prompt asks for will help you set a clear GOAL for your writing. Do you need to analyze? Argue? Report? Are there other specific limitations that will narrow down the possibilities for your topic?

### 2. Know your purpose

Once you've gotten familiar with your prompt, establish a goal or purpose for your essay. Keep in mind your audience—who they are and why they'll want to read your work.

### **3. Gather information**

One way to get ideas for a topic is to research. Is there a broad concept that you're interested in? Try reading some research that scholars have already done in the field and see what they're saying.

You may find interesting information that takes you in new directions or raises new questions for you to answer. Or you may find that nobody has done a lot of work on the concept you're interested in—which means there's a place for your work.

### **4. Brainstorm**

If a clear topic hasn't emerged yet, you might try brainstorming tactics to see what ideas are in your head. Try listing, freewriting, mind-mapping, or talking to a tutor. If your ideas seem scattered, getting them down is one way to see clearly how they connect, and that will be your topic.

### **5. Choose a topic**

Once you've done some research and brainstorming, keeping in mind your purpose and goal, you should be ready to select your topic—the specific question you'll be answering in your writing.

It's a good idea to check in with your instructor to make sure you're on the right track with your selection. From here, keep researching and brainstorming—and then you're ready to start Outlining!