

Part 2: Choosing A Topic

Choosing a topic can often be the hardest part of writing an essay. Here are a few guidelines to help you through the process:

- 1) Pick a topic that you are interested in. You will express yourself with more clarity and insight if you are interested in the topic that you are writing about.
- 2) You should pick a topic based on the assigned texts that you understood. While writing your essay, the majority of your energy will be focused on explaining and supporting your individual perspective and Thesis, so it is important that you understand and feel comfortable talking about the primary (and possibly secondary) material that will form the basis of your essay.
- 3) Select a topic that is challenging and thought provoking. You want to write about a topic that is interesting to you. Your essay should reflect your own individual and unique perspective on your chosen topic. It should not be a mere restatement of the already existing academic ideas on the topic. So, you should choose a topic that challenges you and allows you room to express yourself in relation to the primary source text, and the secondary sources (if they are applicable to your assignment).
- 4) Your topic should be specific enough that you can form an opinion about it, but general enough that you can find enough information to support your perspective and write a comprehensive and substantial essay.

You must have a topic chosen before you can begin to gather information and write your essay.

If your professor has assigned a specific title for your essay, then this is exactly what you should use and nothing else. The decision will save you a great deal of unnecessary work.

Narrowing Down Your Topic:

Your professor will usually assign general essay topics for you to write about. This is done to give you a wider opportunity to fit your own individual perspective into the essay.

But, this generality can also be a problem for many students. In narrowing down your topic, you should consider the following ideas:

- 1) Identify and define the main elements of the topic that you have chosen and look at the different ways that they can be applied to the primary material of your essay. (See the examples below for a method of finding **a specific aspect** through the definition of the main element of your topic.)
- 2) Pay attention to the length that the professor has assigned for the essay. The length can dictate the amount of information that you will be able to fit into your paper. The length will also dictate the number of body parts that you will be able to use to support your Thesis. As a general rule, the shorter the essay, the more limited and precise the topic will be. The longer the essay, the more space you will have to explore your topic and its implications and complexity.
- 3) In narrowing down your topic, pay attention to the specific aspects of the topic that are addressed within the primary text(s) for your essay and within class discussion. This will give you an indication of the specific ways that you can write about your source material. Professors are usually looking for a specific topic that addresses one of the central ideas of the material that you are studying. Choose the specific aspect that you feel runs through as much of the text as possible. This will afford you a topic that can be developed through the course of the primary source(s) to present your reading audience with a clearer view of the text or the ideas that dominate the material.
- 4) If you have any doubts about how you can find a specific aspect to address within the assigned topics, or if you are unsure as to which aspect you should focus on, do not hesitate to contact your professor for guidance. Often, this can save you a great deal of wasted effort and can help to focus your attention on a specific avenue for researching your topic.

For Example:

Example #1:

If your professor asks you to write an essay that illustrates the importance of the ideal of Love in Petronius' "The Widow of Ephesus", you have several options to explore in relation to the general topic of love.

By definition, love is an affectionate emotional bond between people.

So, you can focus your attention on 1) the town's perspective on the love between the widow and her husband and then the widow and the soldier, or 2) on the nature of love in the relationship between the widow and her departed husband, or

3) on the nature of love in the relationship between the widow and the soldier. Each of these three specific aspects allows you an avenue through which to collect information about the general topic of love in the story.

or

Example #2:

If your professor asks you to write an essay that illustrates the importance of duty in Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener", you have several avenues to explore concerning the role of duty in the story.

By definition, duty is the obligation that an individual or group feels in relation to a principle, a goal, or another individual or group of people. So, you can focus your attention on the following aspects: 1) Bartleby's public duty as a member of an industrial consumer society, 2) Bartleby's professional duty as an employee of the law firm, 3) Bartleby's social duty to his fellow employees and his employer, and 4) Bartleby's personal duty to himself. Each of these four specific aspects allows you an avenue through which to collect information about the general topic of duty in the story.

In relation to the above two examples, it is important that you come to a specific aspect or set of ideas within a general topic as a place to start your research. You should not confuse this with the Thesis of your essay. Later, you will need to refine your topic further to decide upon a specific Thesis statement that you can prove based on the research that you have done on the topic that you have chosen.