

### Choosing and Narrowing a Topic for a Research Paper or Class Assignment.

**Goals:** One of the most challenging and overwhelming aspects of the research process is selecting and refining a topic. Students will begin the research process by choosing a subject and going through the process of topic development in order to find the necessary information that is needed to write a thesis statement.

**Objectives:** Students will go through a series of logical steps in order to find a topic that is relevant to their assignment and meaningful to them. They will choose a topic, find background information on the topic, narrow the focus of the topic and then write a working thesis statement that will guide the development of their research.

**Materials:** Instruction room in the library, cart with selected encyclopedias, CQ Researcher, current popular and scholarly journals and newspapers.

**Time Required:** One class session.

#### **Lesson:**

- Introduce the concept of topic development. What are the steps necessary to begin the process? The progression of going from the broad to the specific. Librarian will use an example to demonstrate the process of choosing and narrowing a topic. This example will depend on the class and parameters of the assignment.
- Too much or too little information? Challenges of too broad or too narrow a topic.
- Review the steps: Brainstorming ideas→ Finding background information on your topic→ Narrow your topic→ Working thesis statement .
- Use the Encyclopedia Britannica online to teach how to find background information and refine the focus of your topic. (May want to mention the pitfalls of Wikipedia.)
- Encyclopedias and other general reference sources are a good jumping off point for research. BUT, they will need a variety of sources for the final assignment.
- Elicit ideas and suggestions from the class as you browse through the encyclopedia. Write down all suggestions and use them to narrow or broaden the topic.
- Hand out worksheet and spend the rest of the class period working one on one with students.
- Worksheet is due at the end of class. Librarian will review worksheet and provide the necessary feedback comments. Return to students by the next class session.

#### **Assignment:**

- Topic Development Worksheet
- Students will browse the selected reference books and periodicals in order to generate ideas for a chosen topic.
- By the end of class each student will have completed the worksheet and have a working thesis statement to guide their research.

### Assignment – Choosing and Narrowing a Topic

Librarian: \_\_\_\_\_

Due Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Professor: \_\_\_\_\_

Remember to keep the assignment in mind as you work through this process.

1. **Brainstorming ideas:** What hot topics have been in the news lately? Is there an issue that you think your classmates should know about? What special interests to you have? Write down at least three topic ideas.
2. **Finding background information:** Select one topic from the above list and look for background information in an encyclopedia or reference book. Jot down some at least three specific facts or aspects of the topic you would want to explore further. Provide a stylistically correct citation for this source (in the style of your professor's preference). You will need this information for your bibliography.
3. **Write a thesis/topic statement.** Use the list you created in step 2 to choose one narrower aspect of your topic. Once you have selected a specific aspect of your topic, write it down as a statement. This statement expresses the topic and purpose of your paper or assignment. It will guide your research and help you to stay focused. A good thesis statement should:
  - tackle a subject upon which reasonable people could disagree and tell the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter
  - deal with a subject that can be adequately researched given the nature of the assignment
  - express one main idea
  - assert your conclusions about a subject
  - avoid vague language (like "it seems").
  - avoid the first person. ("I believe," "In my opinion")
  - be a road map for the paper; in other words, it tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
  - be in the form of a single sentence somewhere within your first 2 or 3 paragraphs

#### Examples of Good Thesis Statements

*While both Northerners and Southerners believed they fought against tyranny and oppression, Northerners focused on the oppression of slaves while Southerners defended their own rights to property and self-government.*

*Even though Christians and Muslims were supposedly fighting for religious dominance in the medieval world, their motives were strongly affected by the desire for land and economic influence.*