PICKING A TOPIC

INTRODUCTION

Your assignment says you have to write a paper, and you need to come up with the topic yourself. Lots of people have a hard time doing this. In this video I'll go through some strategies to make it easier. Then we'll see how to make sure your topic is a good one.

IDENTIFYING A TOPIC

First we'll start with tips for identifying a topic.

You will need to pick a topic that is interesting to you, since you will be spending a lot of time on it. You also need to make sure it is relevant to your course. Read the assignment instructions carefully to make sure you know what is required before you start, and clarify with your instructor if you need to.

The best way to start is to look through your course notes and readings. Pick a few things you thought were interesting, and would like to know more about.

Topics often involve one of two approaches. You can pick a topic from class that you want to look at in more detail, like employment discrimination. Or, you can take a concept you learned about in class and apply it to something else. For example, if you learned about pay equity for women, you could look at it for recent immigrants.

Most people start with a basic idea for a topic, but need to narrow it down. That means you'll need to spend some time thinking about what aspect of the topic you want to focus on.

One strategy for doing this is to sit down and write down anything about the topic you can think of.

You can brainstorm using a concept map, which lets you group your ideas in clusters. Here's one on employment discrimination. One aspect is discrimination in hiring, why it exists and how it happens, or how it affects certain groups, like how immigrants' qualifications are viewed. You could also talk about promotion, including the glass ceiling for women. Or you could talk about pay, for different groups like women or immigrants.

Once you've done brainstorming, pick one of the smaller things to focus on. Here I'll choose how immigrant qualifications are viewed in hiring.

Before you go any further with your new topic, you need to test it to be sure it's workable. There needs to be enough information on it to write a paper.

The best way to do this is to do a quick search in a Library database on your topic, to see how much scholarly information about your topic you can easily find. On our topic I found more than 2,000 results, which means it's workable.

IS YOUR TOPIC WORKABLE?

Now that you have a workable topic, you need to make sure it is the right size for your paper.

People often pick topics that are too big for the length of paper they have to write. When this happens, there will be too much information on too many things to fit into the paper, which makes it hard to write and not focused enough.

Some people, though, pick a topic that is too small and specific. This means there won't be enough information to work with, and you'll have trouble writing enough.

Having a topic appropriate for the length of your paper will make things easier and result in a better paper.

How can you tell if your topic is the right size? One easy way is to look at the results of the search you just did. If you get a lot of results, and those results cover a lot of different sub-areas within your topic, it's is likely too broad. In my search, I have more than 2000, which is too many. I'll need to narrow it by picking a sub-area and focusing on it instead.

I can do that by looking through my results, seeing what specific areas people have written about, and focusing on one of those. For example, based on these results I could focus on a specific type of job, like teaching.

You can also scroll down the page and look at Subject in the left menu. Subjects are descriptions of what the articles are about, and can help you narrow your topic. In the list of Subjects, I decide to focus on Education.

Now I have 230 results, which is much better but still quite a lot. I can scroll down to see what aspects of the topic there are in my results, and focus even more by picking one of these. Here for example I could focus on the equivalency of foreign educational credentials in Canada.

But what do you do if your topic is too narrow and you can't find enough information? For example, here I tried a search for scholarly articles on Angelina Jolie's charity work, and didn't find much.

If this happens, first try using different search words to see if those work better.

If that doesn't work, think broader. If I expand the topic to include all celebrities instead of just Angelina Jolie, I get a whole lot more articles, which makes it a workable topic.

QUESTIONS & FEEDBACK

If you have any questions, ask us at library.wlu.ca/help/askus.

Let us know whether or not this video was helpful. Go to library.wlu.ca/videofeedback to give us feedback and help us improve.