PICKING A TOPIC IN PSYCHOLOGY

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 that make it easier. Then we'll look at how to make sure your topic is a good one.

IDENTIFYING A TOPIC

First, let's look at some strategies for identifying a topic.

You'll need to pick a topic that's interesting to you, since you'll be spending a lot of time on it. You'll also need to make sure it's relevant to your course. Read the assignment instructions carefully to make sure you know what's required before you start, and ask your instructor if anything isn't clear.

The best way to start is to look through your course notes, readings, and other course materials. 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 you covered in class and want to look at in more detail on one smaller aspect, like animal learning behavior. Or you can take a concept you learned about in class and apply it to something else. For example, if you learned about factors influencing peoples' decision to exercise, you might apply those ideas to dieting.

Once you have one or two possibilities, sit down and brainstorm to come up with some specific ideas for that topic. Don't worry at this stage if it's a good or bad idea--you're trying to get a lot of ideas. Here's an example of a brainstorming session on psychological factors involved in dieting. Some ideas include how people view portion size, how they react to visual cues of how food looks, how people learn which foods they like, and the impacts of distraction or focus while eating.

Next, look at what you have and organize your ideas. It's often helpful to use something like sticky notes. Write each idea on a sticky note, then rearrange them in groups with common themes or concepts. You can also use a concept map for this. Draw circles for each idea and form clusters for ideas that are related. Then, pick one of your subtopics to get a topic for your paper. In this example, I'll pick how children learn to like certain tastes.

IS YOUR TOPIC WORKABLE?

Now that you have a topic, you need to be sure it's a good one. One important criteria is whether it's workable: is there enough information out there that you can write a paper?

The best way to make sure your topic is workable is to do a quick search for articles in a Library database for Psychology. To do this, go to the main Library web page. Select Subject Guides from the Services menu on the top navigation bar. Then choose the Psychology link. This will show a list of Psychology resources. Under the Main Databases heading, pick *PsycInfo*, a key database in Psychology.

I'm going to search for food preferences and learning. I get lots of articles on this topic, which means my topic is workable and I'll have enough to use for a paper.

IS YOUR TOPIC THE RIGHT SIZE?

Now that you have a workable topic, you need to be sure it's the right size for your paper.

People often pick topics that are too broad for the length of paper they have to write. If your topic is too broad, you'll have too much information on too many things, and not enough space to cover anything in depth. This leads to more work and time researching and reading, and a paper that isn't great.

Other people, though, pick a topic that is too narrow and specific. A narrow topic doesn't give you enough information to work with, and you'll have trouble writing enough. Having a topic that's appropriate for your paper will make things easier for you and result in a better paper.

So how can you tell if your topic is the right size? One way is to look at the results of the search you just did. If you get a lot of results, especially if they are on a lot of different aspects of the topic, your topic is usually too broad. That's the case in my search, where I got 2,172 results.

I can narrow it by picking one of the sub-areas and focusing on that instead. One way to do this is to look at the Subjects and pick one. Scroll down to find Subject in the left menu and click on it. Then click on More to see a larger list. You'll see a list of subtopics that will give you some ideas of ways you can narrow.

In this case, if I scroll through I see humans and decide to choose that. Click to check the box next to humans under Include, then click Apply. This will give me 303 results, which is much better.

It's still quite a lot of articles though, so you can repeat this strategy. If you click on More under Subject again, you can narrow even further. Here for example I can pick taste perception, which has 54 articles. That's enough to work with but not too many, which lets me know my topic is probably a good size.

There are other options for narrowing your results in the left menu along with Subject, like Age Group and Methodology. If you click on those, you'll see options to choose certain age groups, such as children, or specific types of research studies, like interviews or empirical studies.

That's how to focus your topic if it's too broad.

But sometimes you might pick a topic that's too narrow. I'll do a search for Facebook, bullying, and alcohol. I don't get any results. If this happens, first try using different words in your search to see if they work better. If you don't have much success, your topic is likely too narrow.

When this happens, you'll need to broaden it. In this example, you could expand to "social media" instead of just Facebook. I'll do another search using social media, bullying, and alcohol. I get 4 scholarly articles, which is much better than none. You could likely find more if you need them by going through the same process and thinking of broader concepts for your other terms.

If you follow these tips you'll have a course-related, workable topic. But if you really want to do a good job, you'll do a few other things too. One of them is to turn your topic into a research question, which will help you focus your research, reading, and writing and save you time. Learn about research questions in another of these videos, *Developing a Research Question*, at library.wlu.ca/help/tutorials.

QUESTIONS AND FEEDBACK

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

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