



Choosing a Topic

How Do I... Undergraduate Research Guides

Part of the "Start My Research Series"

In this guide you will learn how to:

- Find Topics in your text books, scan encyclopedias or think of current events.
- Develop a Focus
- Get Background Info
- Narrow the Topic by choosing an issue
- Narrow the Topic by choosing a certain time period or geographic area.

Need More Help? Ask a Librarian!

Website:
www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl

Screen Name:
askundergrad

Fall and Spring Hours:
Open Sunday 10am-
Close Friday 10pm
(24 hours)
Saturday 10am-10pm

Reference Hours:
Sun-Thurs: 10am-Midnight
Friday & Saturday:
10am-10pm

Phone:
Reference: 217.333.8589
Info Services: 217.333.3477



One of the most difficult steps in beginning a research paper can be choosing a topic. Below you will find suggestions for selecting and focusing a topic and lists of possible topics to help jump start the process for you.

Strategies for focusing a broad research topic:

1. **Develop a tentative focus.** Make a list of things you already know about the topic and a list of questions you would like to answer about the topic. From the list of questions, choose those you find most interesting.
Do some preliminary background reading of an article in a subject encyclopedia - *Ask a Librarian* (<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/askus/>) for assistance with this step.
2. **Get some background information on your topic.** If you know very little about the topic you have chosen, you may experience difficulty narrowing it. Having some background knowledge on the topic will help you decide how to narrow your focus.
Look for magazine articles to get a general idea of the key issues or controversies involved in your topic. Databases such as *Academic Search Premier* or *Academic OneFile* (www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl/find/articleguide.html) are both good starting places to find magazine articles.
3. **Narrow your topic by choosing a particular perspective on the issue.** Scholars from different subject fields will approach your topic from different angles and will bring different points of view to bear on the subject. A specialist in genetics will approach the topic genetic engineering of plants differently than a nutritionist, an environmentalist, or an economist.
4. **Narrow your topic by limiting it to a specific time period or geographic area.** This will help better focus your search for information. Look for Limit options in the databases you search.
Browse CQ Researcher. This is a great source for finding background information and overviews of a wide array of topics. You can find CQ Researcher on the page listed above for Academic Search Premier.



Finding research topic ideas

You can find ideas for research topics by using the following strategies and resources:



Scan your textbook for topic ideas and suggestions.

Think of what you have read or seen recently that interested you.

You'll be spending a bit of time on your research paper, so be sure to choose a topic that will sustain your interest!

Draw on your other classes for inspiration.

Are there issues, ideas, or materials from other classes that intrigue you? Is there something you'd like to learn more about?

Pick a topic that is practical.

Are you considering a career in politics, hoping to start your own business, or thinking of studying abroad next year? Choose a topic that allows you to learn about something you can apply to your daily life.

Browse an encyclopedia for ideas.

General encyclopedias cover all subject areas, and might give you some good ideas. The Undergraduate Library has some located in the Reference Collection, in the 032 call number area. Check the Index volumes for subjects. (Important Note: General encyclopedia articles, while acceptable for high school papers, are generally too superficial in their treatment of a subject for use as sources in a college research assignment. General encyclopedias are a good starting point for your research, but you will need to move on to other types of sources for more detailed treatment of your topic).

Look for subject encyclopedias for information about a topic. These will have more detail and specialized information than a general encyclopedia. As a librarian for help to identify some titles.

Browsing *Wikipedia* can provide some topic ideas. Keep in mind when doing so that anyone can change and edit entries in Wikipedia.

Check out other How Do I... Guides in this series, Start My Research:

- Developing a Topic
- Use Reference Sources
- Find Topic Ideas
- Creating a Concept Map