

Focus Your Research Topic

Ever look at your assignment and have no idea what to discuss in your paper? Maybe, you have a list of suggested topics or you have the freedom to select your own topic. How do you narrow your topic for the paper so you're not overwhelmed with the amount of information you find?

In this short tutorial, we will work through the steps to focus your research topic, so you can start researching and writing!

Selecting a topic. Look at your assignment and course content for guidance. Are there any topics that interest you? Unfamiliar topics? Maybe there was a discussion in class on a topic that you're passionate about?

Maybe you have an idea for a topic within your academic discipline but not sure if it meets the requirements for your assignment? Take a moment to review your assignment handout and ask your instructor or TA for advice.

In this case, it's important to select a subject that is important to you or truly interesting for you to explore.

You like to listen to music, so let's explore the topic of music. But, music is too broad. There are millions of subtopics to explore.

This may be your first-time researching music for an academic paper, so the next step is to look at background information on this topic. In the library you can look at encyclopedias, dictionaries, textbooks, books or book chapters, and even newspaper articles related to music. Outside the library you may be inspired by topic from an Instagram post, or a Tik Tok video, or something you read in a magazine. This will help you find emerging trends and topics within the subject area which can help you brainstorm ideas to focus your topic.

These resources will allow you to browse through subgenres and topics. These sources will help you develop a strong understanding of your topic and possibly brainstorm ideas to focus your work.

Focus your topic and your search by thinking of 3 or more keywords related to this topic. For example, your topic is related to music production in films. You may start to your search with the words: scoring, music, film, ideas you may have found from your initial background reading.

Once you review the results of your search, you may find some relevant results, but it still may not be focused enough. As you find resources, to further focus your topic, you may describe your topic using the 5W's "who, what, when, where, why" questions and "how." Another excellent strategy for brainstorming possible ideas to focus your topic.

Considering our example of music production in films, think of these questions to help you focus your topic: Which film genre? What music era or time period? Is there a specific location or country? Are you comparing scoring styles and by which composers? Are there any other aspects of this topic that could be interesting to investigate?

Following these reflection questions, you may develop an interest in music production in horror films from 1920-1950. Horror films being a subgenre of film, and 1920-present being a date range to narrow your topic.

Keep in mind, you do not want to narrow your topic so much that there aren't any relevant sources for your paper. Some topics may be in a niche area with limited research. This can be frustrating when you run your search and don't retrieve any results.

If you find that you have narrowed your topic too much, try broadening your topic and search. For example, if you used the "where" question and focused on one country, try searching multiple countries or the continent to broaden the topic, search, and results. Or if you considered searching a specific subgenre, try searching the general genre or various subgenres.

If you need help finding and narrowing your topic and search, ask a librarian!