

1.3. SELECTING A TOPIC

1.3.1. Freedom of Choice

Different courses and different instructors offer widely varying degrees of freedom to students selecting topics for research papers. The instructor of a course in a specific discipline (e.g., art, history, literature, science) may supply a list of topics from which to choose or may, more generally, require that the paper relate to an important aspect of the course. If you are given the latter option, review course readings and class notes to find topics that particularly interest you. Discuss possibilities with other students and with your instructor. If your choice is limited to a set list of topics, you will probably still need to decide which aspect of a topic to explore or which approach to use.

In a writing class, you may have more freedom to select a topic. The instructor may assign a general problem that can generate many kinds of responses—for example, you might be asked to choose a modern invention and show what benefits and problems it has brought about. If you have complete freedom to choose a topic, consider using a personal interest that lends itself to research (e.g., education, the environment, movies, new technologies, nutrition, politics, the business of sports) or an issue that has recently generated public interest or controversy (e.g., immigration policy, global warming, stem cell research, terrorism).

Teachers understand the importance of choosing an appropriate topic for a research paper. When freedom of choice is permitted, students are commonly required to submit topics to the instructor for approval early in the research project. If your campus has a writing center, find out how to make use of the resources there. It is preferable to contact the writing center in the early stages of your project.

1.3.2. Finding an Appropriate Focus

As you choose a topic, remember the time allotted to you and the expected length of the research paper. “International politics in the modern age” would obviously be too broad a subject for a ten-page term paper. You may prefer to begin with a fairly general topic and then to refine it, by thought and research, into a more specific one that can be fully explored. Try to narrow your topic by focusing on an aspect of

the subject or an approach to it. A student initially interested in the general subject of "violence in the media" might decide, after careful thought and reading, to write on "the effects of cartoon violence on preschool children." Likewise, an interest in architecture could lead to a focus on the design and construction of domes, which could in turn be narrowed to a comparison between the ancient Roman dome and the modern geodesic dome.

Preliminary reading is essential as you evaluate and refine topics. Consult, in print and electronic form, general reference works, such as encyclopedias, as well as articles and books in the areas you are considering (see 1.4 on conducting research). You can also refine your topic by doing subject searches in reference databases (see 1.4.4c) and in online catalogs (see 1.4.5a) and through Internet search tools (see 1.4.8d). Such preliminary reading and searches will also let you know if enough work has been done on the subject to permit adequate research and whether the pertinent source materials are readily accessible.

Selecting an appropriate topic is seldom a simple matter. Even after you discover a subject that attracts your interest, you may well find yourself revising your choice, modifying your approach, or changing topics altogether after you have begun research.

1.3.3. SUMMING UP

- Give yourself plenty of time to think through and rethink your choice of a topic.
- Look for a subject or an issue that will continue to engage you throughout research and writing.
- Consult library materials and other print and electronic information resources to refine the topic and to see if sufficient work has been done on the subject to make it a viable topic for the research paper.
- Before settling on a final topic, make sure you understand the amount and depth of research required and the type and length of paper expected.
- If you encounter problems at any point in the project, do not hesitate to consult your instructor, whether to clarify the assignment or to get help in choosing, developing, or researching a topic or in preparing the paper. A campus writing center can be a useful resource.