

# Writing a Research Paper

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## Topic

### *Introduction*

Before you even consider the "topics" issue, take some time now to find out how to save yourself headaches and agony by thoroughly understanding the assignment.

Good. Now that you have some guidelines on what you'll be doing, you need something to do it *on*: a topic.

Either luckily or unluckily depending on your own need for guidance, the teacher may not only dole out the assignment but even hand out sheets of possible topics or actual thesis statements to defend. death?

Remember: unless otherwise specified that you must only choose from the options given to you, don't be shy about taking the initiative to approach your professor with ideas of your own as long as it's not because the suggested topics look "too hard." Your topic should exist at the same level (or above!) any suggested topics. But you should also look for something you'd be motivated to do.

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You may even be *forced* to go on your own with very little direction. Assignments often give students a word or page count and a deadline, with the only real direction about "subject matter" being that the paper has to look at some topic covered in the course in a more in-depth fashion. For example, in a first-year poetry course I took, one of our assignments, though it did not require secondary sources, was on a little slip of paper that read:

Write an essay of approximately 1,000 words (3-4 double spaced pages) in which you discuss your response to one of the poems we have discussed in the lectures or tutorials. Pay careful attention to the narrative elements: speaker, tone, diction, point of view, characters, setting, and/or plot. In paying close attention to both the text and your reaction to it, you will need to reflect on what you think the poem is about and the view of life it presents.

You'll still have to go through the idea-generation stage even if you're given a sheet of topics or possible theses. But locating something that might pique your interest off that sheet is pretty self-explanatory: follow

your instincts. However, for the other, more-vaguely-expressed extreme in assignments as shown above, how are you supposed to come up with a topic of and on your own to generate ideas about?

Now that you don't feel that mental fuel tank is empty to begin with, it's time to fill it up.

Don't be immediately scared of a topic or "topics" in general. Too often, students are exasperated from the beginning because they don't feel they have any authority or knowledge about their subject area. That's not a great attitude to start with. Have faith in your own smarts and course work. You'll start the research in the next step. Nobody's expecting you to be an expert or get your paper published in a journal, so just start jotting down ideas about things related to your topic. You may even want to keep a journal to keep everything in one place. So step one is to relax.

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and course work . . . . Step one is  
to relax.*

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Be sure though not just to put down things you think you should write about or might want to write about but basically just **anything** that comes to mind when you look at the topic. The important thing here is not to edit your meanderings; this is not the step for second-guessing what you've written. Connotations, associations, related concepts, connections--that's what you're looking for to get a topic. To accomplish this, try some specific invention techniques.

The real key to successful papers that you can actually enjoy writing <gasp!> is **motivation**, which is why your topic choice is so important. During your idea-generation activities, once you have started seeing great things jumping out at you, finish your "session" and then make a list of why a potential topic is important. To do this:

**First think of yourself**--is this something you believe in? that sounds fun? that you sincerely want to learn more about? that intrigues you? Even when you're given a set topic in advance, you can always frame it to suit your needs and style--so get *something* out of it. Or if you have more freedom, maybe it turns out that your favorite poet's work (from some English course you took a few semesters ago) fits into your unit on feminism. Why not see if you can explore that further now? Or maybe you're doing a double major...why not substantiate your decision and try and connect the two fields in a paper? Perhaps symbolic imagery or the French Revolution has always been something you wanted to really dig your hands

into but never had a chance. The possibilities are endless. So go ahead and be selfish. Your paper will be the better for it.

**Then think of the audience** - will other people familiar with this subject care to read what you're writing? Do you have something to say or are you babbling and wasting space? Use common sense and intuition here. It might be loads of fun to talk about the evolution of the toilet paper roll, but if you suspect your readers will find themselves going "Yeah, so what?" and just reading for reading's sake, you'll be in trouble and your grade will reflect it.

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*Research papers were never  
intended to be useless torture, so  
let them work for you as well as  
for your readers.*

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