

Writing a Research Paper

Topic

How do you pick your own topic?

With our aforementioned example I had at least two dozen poems to choose from. I had to first think "Which poems have we studied and did I have an automatic response to any while reading them?" and then "Which narrative elements can I fit into a 1,000-word paper?" It's a good thing I took the time to ask questions and [understand the assignment](#) since it turned out I only needed to focus on one or two at the most or even elements not mentioned on the assignment sheet.

Therefore, before you start the brainstorming pens and juices flowing, start thinking early. Is there a particular subject area within your discipline that you're interested in? Have you recently heard something in class or read something in the textbook that piqued your curiosity? Did a tutorial discussion really seem fascinating? Is there something worth exploring that will help you with a future course or even an upcoming exam for the present course? After all, who says you can't use a research paper as an in-depth study tool?

Make use of your readings. Material you covered in lecture. Facts or subheadings from the textbook. Your own notes or doodled questions in the margins of your page. Insights brought up in tutorial discussions. Or browse through an index of topics such as *The Library of Congress Subject Headings* or *the Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, or through more subject-specific catalogs easily found in most libraries.

Don't write anything down just yet. The idea is to get words, associated topics, and abstract concepts floating around your brain before you even start to touch a pen or keyboard. You want to get the mental juices, if not flowing, at least uncapped.

Don't fret. Even if none of the above works for you, our [Invention Techniques](#) page and the **Topics** links at the end of this step will give you a great list of starting-points to help you generate wonderful "somethings" from the "nothing" you feel you're faced with now.