

Your Research Paper: Topic Development

Do you have any ideas yet for your paper? How much leeway has your professor given you regarding topic? What is his/her purpose in assigning you this paper? Even if your topic is assigned, your paper needs a thesis.

Thinking carefully about the main idea you want to convey, and why it's important, will help your paper's focus and make someone (such as your professor) want to read it. Write down at least one idea for a topic, or an angle on your assigned topic.

Evaluate

- Is your topic interesting to you and your professor?
- Will it meet your professor's goals for the assignment?
- Does your topic address any unsolved problems or areas of controversy in your discipline?

Focus: from Topic to Question to Rationale

- Narrow your topic to manageability. There are stacks of books and articles written on your topic. A focused paper concentrates on just one, or at most, a few, aspects or angles on the topic. Try to narrow it down now.
- What do you really care about knowing? Unless it's specifically assigned, avoid the "All I Know about _____" paper. Formulate a research question now.
- Now think, "so what?" Why is the answer to your question important to you? To your reader?
- Fill in your ideas below:

I am studying _____
_____ (topic)

because I want to know and demonstrate to _____ (my audience/reader)
that _____ (question)

in order for us both to understand _____

and solve or avoid _____
_____ (problem/rationale)

From Research Question to Working Thesis Statement

- Do you need to do any preliminary research to fill in the blanks in the form? Alternating writing and research is a normal part of the research paper process.
- Do you have a position on this topic? Adding that to the formula above should give you a solid working thesis, i.e., a clear purpose to your research.
- Remember that it's very likely that you will shift your focus and/or position as you research and write. Don't be alarmed: it means you're learning something.

Search Terms

Finding successful search terms (key words) can be a multi-step process:

- Look at your formula above for key words. Use your thesaurus to find synonyms and related terms.
- Expansion: Brainstorming, fishboning, outlining, free writing
- Visit the library
 - Do new key words turn up in your database search?
 - Do certain authors turn up more frequently than others?
 - Browse the stacks. Do you notice book titles that suggest a tighter direction?
 - Read your sources for bibliographies and additional key words

Your Sources: What Do You Want to Know?

- Evidence for your position
- Background and context
- Opposing positions and different interpretations
- Who are the big voices in your field? It's hard to be credible without them
- Clear definitions for key terms and concepts you might want to explain
- New ideas to focus your research question
 - Do you believe all you read? Do the experts disagree?
 - Can you take a new or narrower angle on an old (or broader) problem?
 - Do the authors make suggestions for further research?
- An idea of the tone, format, and structure that your field or course requires

Start Writing Early

Write down key ideas and your responses (e.g., do they all agree? Do you?) as you do your research. Don't worry about surface polish. Early drafts

- get ideas on paper and can generate new search terms
- help you think through what you know and organize what you want to say
- alert you to spots where you need more evidence
- help you weed through good ideas that might be better in a different paper

Later Drafts

- Do all paragraphs relate to your thesis?
- Do you give detailed examples of your points?
- Acknowledge the existing arguments on your topic
- Be logical, be objective as possible, and use your evidence carefully and accurately
- Integrate your research: imagine yourself in conversation with your sources and them with each other
- Avoid plagiarism
 - Give credit at the same time you give yourself credibility
 - Clearly differentiate between others' ideas and your own: cite all paraphrasing as well as quotes
 - Don't quote your sources in a vacuum, but use them to contextualize, support, or refute your own words and ideas
 - Create an easy path to your sources: complete and accurate citations. You've got them interested—now make it easy for them to find out more