

## Narrowing down the topic

Once you understand the assignment instructions, you are ready to choose and narrow down the topic.

Assignment instructions will most often offer a list of topics to choose from, or guidelines to follow in order to choose an appropriate topic. Either way, this topic will need to be narrowed down enough to establish the scope and the focus of the paper.

### The importance of narrowing down the topic

Having a narrowed down topic helps with some of the other steps of the writing process:

• **Research:**

- While doing a little preliminary research might be useful to know more about the topic and its stakes, doing too much research on a very broad topic is both time-consuming and counterproductive, as most of the facts and the information that are gathered will not be used in the final version of the paper.

• **Brainstorming:**

- A narrowed down topic helps focus the brainstorming session around questions and ideas that are manageable in the scope of the paper.

• **Establishing a preliminary thesis:**

- A narrowed down topic often elicits or suggests a question. The answer to that question can then become a preliminary thesis.
- The next steps of the writing process (creating the outline, writing, and revising) can then naturally flow from this thesis statement.

### How to narrow down the topic

The best way to narrow down the topic is to specify certain elements by asking questions. Each example topic below has been narrowed down based on one aspect:

**Geography / Where?**

*The economic development of Ontario > Ottawa's economic development > The economic development of Ottawa's Westboro Village*

**Demographic / Who?**

*Pepsi's market strategy > Pepsi's market strategy with adults > Pepsi's market strategy with university students*

**Time / When?**

*Law and criminality > Law and criminality in the Medieval era > Law and criminality in the 13<sup>th</sup> century*

**Text or Theme / What?**

*18<sup>th</sup> century poetry > Poetry from the Romantic movement > The poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge > Samuel Taylor Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

*Aldous Huxley's Brave New World > Happiness in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World > The choice between freedom and happiness in Aldous Huxley's Brave New World*

**Cause and Effect / Why? How?**

*The American economic crisis > The role of the housing market on the American economic crisis > Deregulation in the housing market and its effects on the American economic crisis*

Narrowing down more than one element of the topic is usually advisable.

**Time, Geography and Theme**

*Law and criminality > Law and criminality in the 13<sup>th</sup> century > Law and criminality in 13<sup>th</sup> century France > The prosecution of violent crimes in 13<sup>th</sup> century France*

## More examples of narrowing down the topic

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**Assignment instructions:** *Critically examine the seal hunt controversy and establish a position of your own.*

**General topic:** *The seal hunt*

### Example 1

- **What about the seal hunt?**  
*The effects of the seal hunt on society*
- **Which society?**  
*The effects of the seal hunt on Newfoundland*
- **Which more specific group in that society?**  
*The effects of the seal hunt on the Green's Pond community*
- **What kind of effects?**  
*The economic effects of the seal hunt on the Green's Pond community*

### Example 2

- **What about the seal hunt?**  
*The ecological effects of the seal hunt*
- **Which aspect of the ecosystem?**  
*The ecological effects of the seal hunt on the seal population and fish stocks*
- **Which specific ecosystem?**  
*The ecological effects of the seal hunt on the Newfoundland seal population and fish stocks*

### Example 3

- **What about the seal hunt?**  
*The political consequences of the seal hunt*
- **Who is affected?**  
*The political consequences of the seal hunt on relations between Europe and Canada*
- **What is the time frame?**  
*The political consequences of the seal hunt on relations between Europe and Canada in the last three years*

### Example 4

- **What about the seal hunt?**  
*The ethics of the seal hunt*
- **What kind of ethical problem is it?**  
*The ethical dilemma of the seal hunt*
- **What are the elements of the dilemma?**  
*The ethical dilemma of economic necessity versus animal cruelty in the seal hunt*
- **Which specific seal hunt?**  
*The ethical dilemma of economic necessity versus animal cruelty in the Newfoundland seal hunt*

## More questions?

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Remember that you can always write or go speak to your professor or your TA about your assignment, either to obtain clarifications, or to confirm that you are on the right track.

You can also come to the AWHC and make an appointment with one of our writing advisors to discuss any question you might have about the different steps of the writing process:

- Understanding the assignment instructions;
- Narrowing down the topic;
- Brainstorming;
- Establishing a preliminary thesis;
- Research;
- Creating the outline;
- Writing;
- Revision.