

YORKWAC Infobase

Choosing or Understanding Your Topic

Your topic is the general area of your writing assignment. Choosing your topic, or making sure you understand your topic if one has been assigned, is the first step in writing a good essay or research paper.

FUN FACT: *topic* comes from the Greek word *topos*, meaning **place**. You can think of your topic as a place that your paper allows you to explore.

What if the professor has assigned the topic?

If your professor has given you a specific topic to write about, make sure you understand the assignment.

- What questions or issues am I supposed to address in the assignment?
- What research do I need to do?
- What is the required format—structure, length, manuscript preparation, etc.?

What if I have to choose my own topic?

If your professor requires you to choose your own topic, you have more freedom but also more responsibility. Here are some ideas that may help:

- Set up a meeting with your professors to discuss potential topics
- Talk to other students in the class about how they are choosing a topic
- Think about which lecture topics, discussion topics, or readings for the class have been most interesting to you

What do I do once I have a general topic in mind?

Once you have a general idea for a topic, you may have to develop your idea further so you can make your topic more specific. Asking yourself the following questions may help you narrow your topic down.

- What aspect of this topic do I find most *interesting*?
- What aspect of this topic do I think is most *controversial*?
- What aspect of this topic is the focus of the *latest research* in the field?

If you already have a topic for your writing assignment, you may want to try:

Infosheet #1, Organizing Your Paper

Infosheet #5, Some Key Terms for Writing Papers