



Getting Started: Picking a Topic

Common Myths About Topics

“The longer the paper, the broader my topic should be.”

No! Typically the longer the paper length, the more in-depth your study of the topic should be. Use the space to expand your argument, rather than include more general information about the topic.

“If I have a specific topic, I won’t find enough research.”

No! Rather than searching for a paper that is exactly the same as your topic, look for research that addresses parts or aspects of your topic. Writing a paper that just repeats other works is a summary. Write a paper that builds and recombines various other works!



The general principle for assignments is to concentrate on a small focused topic instead of a broad surface level topic.

Write Before You Read

You may be surprised by how much you know before you start your research. Before you overwhelm yourself with new ideas, try to figure out what you already know about the topic. Consider it like building a hypothesis. What do you think will happen before you enter the research process? In many ways, it is like directed brainstorming.

Topic: What is the topic or subject of the paper? What do you already know about the topic?

Problem: What is the topic’s problem or issue within the topic? What can be or is being debated?

Solution/Significance: What is a possible new perspective or solution to the problem? Why do you think this is an important issue? Do you agree with one position?

Refining Your Topic with the 4 W’s

What? Describe the topic or key elements of the topic.

Tip: Define key terms and vocabulary.

Who? Identify current scholars studying the topic or key stakeholders in the debate.

Tip: Does your topic address everyone or only parts of the population? Are certain groups more relevant than others?

When? Pick a timeframe instead of trying to cover every event.

Tip: Rather than covering the entire history of oil development in Alberta, focus on a particular event or turning point. This will make it more manageable to go into more depth.

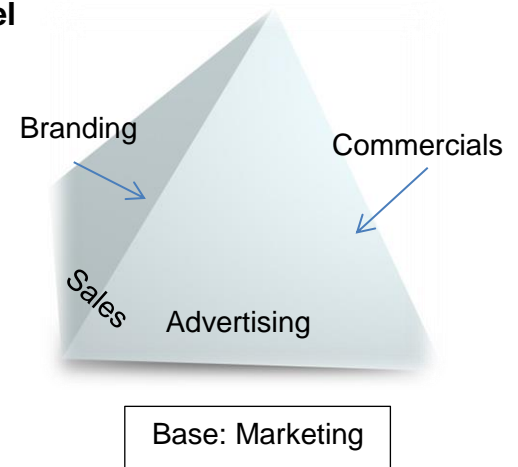
Where? Determine the geographical region for the topic.

Tip: Think about breaking down larger areas into particular regional case studies. Fishing in Canada could become the fishing industry on the East Coast.

These questions will help you to refine your topic, allowing you to address the how and the why.

Building Search Terms: A Pyramid Model

Consider an Egyptian pyramid. It contains a square base and 4 triangle sides. You may find that the first word you use to describe your idea may be too specific or too general. Start with the most specific word and then build a pyramid with 4 other words which include aspects of the base word. Consider repeating this exercise several times before you start to research.



In fact, you can create a “monster search” by using Boolean operators. Consider using the formula below:

(Search Term 1 **OR** Search Term 2 **OR** Search Term 3) **AND** (Choice 1 **OR** Choice 2 **OR** Choice 3)