

Writing an Essay: Choosing a Topic

Note: These reference guides do not take the place of assignment guidelines



Topic selection begins with your assignment prompt. Some professors will assign a specific prompt or set of prompts to guide you in your topic selections, while others will leave it up to you to decide on your topic. No matter the essay style or prompt, the steps below can help guide you through the topic selection process.

Step One: Invention (Brainstorming)

Something important to keep in mind as you begin deciding on a topic is that this may be a paper that you work on over the course of an entire semester, and one which will be peer reviewed and critiqued by your professor, likely multiple times. Because of this, topics that you may already have strong opinions on, such as religion, politics, or hobbies, are not always the best choices for an essay. Instead, try to think of something new and interesting to explore, which will help keep you from burning out on your topic. Some things you can consider when selecting a topic are:

- What are some things that have always interested you, but you've just never had the time to really learn about?
- Was there a certain reading or assignment that you did for class that really struck you as interesting or memorable?
- Is there something about the degree you are considering pursuing that you would like to know more about?

There are a number of strategies you can use to brainstorm on your potential topics. For example, you might try free writing, in which you write a few sentences about a topic and what you think about it or what questions you have regarding it. Our Brainstorming handout can give you some other ideas of how to select a topic.

Sample Brainstorming: Your class might be talking about sustainability in your local Florida ecosystem. This may remind you of an article you read about a company that was trying to build a sustainable alligator housing preserve next to a new housing development. You don't know much about housing developments in Florida or what a "sustainable housing preserve" might even be, but you do like alligators and think you might like to know more.

At this point you don't need to worry about "taking a side" concerning your claim. Just try to come up with 2 -3 topics that you feel comfortable learning and writing about before you move on to the next step.

Step Two: Researching

Once you have a few topics selected, you can begin doing preliminary research. As with the kind of topic you select, the kind of research you conduct will be shaped by the kind of paper you are writing.

Sample Research: If you are thinking about writing an argumentative paper about building sustainable alligator housing near housing developments, then you might begin doing research about what sustainable alligator housing projects are and who makes them. You might think about finding an article on the history of Florida's housing developments or a book about alligator habitats. You may also explore what opinions surround these sustainable housing projects—who supports them, who doesn't support them, and why. Your argument may have more than one side to it, so feel free to explore all of them as you research and continue to refine your claim.

At this point, you might find yourself developing your own opinions on your topic. While it can be easy to immediately want to write about the claim that matches with your own beliefs, it is worth taking the time to consider which sides of the argument have the stronger, more credible evidence, and which will be easier to develop an entire essay around.

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Step Three: Forming your Claim

Once you have gathered your research and decided which side of your topic you would like to argue, you can begin developing the overall claim for your paper. Your thesis will act as a response to this claim, so it can be easiest to think about this part of the topic in the form of a question. Your “topic question” becomes something that you can then answer with your thesis, which will in turn become the roadmap for your body paragraphs. These questions can approach the topic from multiple angles, so it can help to come up with 2 – 3 different ones to help you refine your claim even further.

Sample Topic Question: “Why do alligators that live near housing developments need to have their own sustainable housing projects?”

“What is the effect on housing developments on natural alligator habitats in Florida?”

“How are sustainable housing projects meant to help alligators, and do they actually work?”

You may discover that your topic question is, in essence, a more refined version of the questions you may have asked yourself while you were initially brainstorming your topic. As with deciding which side of your topic to argue in your paper, you can decide which topic question you ultimately wish to answer by seeing which can be answered with the stronger, more credible evidence.

Once you have a topic question, it is time to develop your thesis statement. Be sure to check out our Thesis Statement handout for more information, and visit the Writing Center for help you might need in selecting a topic for your next essay!