

# RESEARCH CONCEPTS & PRACTICE

## Topic Selection

### Specific Writing Prompts

Sometimes instructors are explicit when it comes to dictating **specific paper topics**. A history professor may require all students in the course to write a paper on the politics of W.E.B. DeBois, Booker T. Washington, and Ida Wells-Barnett, and discuss the unique role each of these individuals played in African-American history. This is an example of a clearly defined, specific assignment.

### Limited Flexibility Prompts

Other instructors will give students **limited flexibility**. They will define part of the project for you, but still allow you some freedom within their set guidelines to indulge personal interests. For instance, a political science professor may ask students to write on the contribution of any U.S. political figure after 1860. Students must write about a political figure, but have the freedom to choose someone that appeals to them. Alternately, an instructor may offer several writing prompts from which a student may choose. Other instructors like to assign the class a broad theme (e.g. poverty) and let students focus their research on some aspect of that theme (e.g. the effects of raising the minimum wage).

In these controlled flexibility cases, indulge your personal interests and proclivities as much as possible. Reflect on your options carefully and thoughtfully in order to select a topic about which you already have some knowledge (or thoughts, opinions, ideas, etc.)

### Total Flexibility Prompts

Many instructors try to engage students in the research and writing process by inviting them to investigate a topic of their own choosing. The instructor's hope is that the research and writing process will be made more enjoyable if students are allowed to explore a topic that holds true meaning for them.

Some students love the freedom allowed by this freestyle type of prompt. Unfortunately, for many other students this freedom serves to exacerbate an already stressful situation. The array of topics are endless, and a good portion of the time allotted to researching and writing your paper can easily be squandered as topics are selected, rejected, and agonized upon.

Below are some ideas to assist you in selecting a topic.

1. Think about researching something that is already a part of your life. Here are some questions to ask yourself:
  - a. What makes you tick? What defines you outside of your academic life? Sports? Recreation? Music? Art? Film? Religion? Your family?
  - b. What problems/situations affect you, or someone close to you? Physical/mental health issues? Crime? Drugs and alcohol? Debt? Relationship woes?
  - c. In your opinion, what is the biggest problem facing us/you today? Poverty? Health care? Education? Energy crisis? Crime? Partisan infighting? Environmental issues? Depression? Divorce?
2. Browse your text and class notes. Choosing a topic that will deepen and/or expand your understanding of what is happening in the classroom is always beneficial.
3. Visit databases that provide ideas for topics, such as *CQ Researcher*, *Issues & Controversies*, and *Access World News (Newsbank)*. These are all available through the Library's Web page.

## Topic Selection: Basic Considerations

When considering a topic, ask yourself these questions:

1. Is this topic **suitable** given the parameters of my specific assignment?
2. Am I genuinely interested in this topic? Am I coming to the table with **something to say**?
3. Is information on this topic readily available? (**Quantity and availability**)
4. Is the available information on this topic **scholarly** enough for college-level research? (Quality)

### Is this topic suitable given the parameters of my specific assignment?

- First and foremost: Is my topic relevant to the writing prompt (subject)?
- Will my topic fit into the what I have to actually DO with this topic (required mode of writing)?
  - Descriptive essays
  - Analytical essays
  - Compare/contrast essays
  - Argumentative/persuasive essays

### Am I genuinely interested in this topic? Am I coming to the table with something to say?

Know thyself. You are going to be spending weeks finding and retrieving information, evaluating it, reading it, reflecting upon it, and writing about it. By choosing a topic about which you already have a connection, about which you have something to say, you will avoid the dreaded chase for word count. Your fear should not be “how will I ever write 2500 words on this topic?” Instead, it should be, “How in the world will I narrow this down to a 2500 word paper?”

### Is information on this topic readily available? (Quantity and availability)

How many outside sources are required? Are there specific limitations/expectations regarding format of these sources? Perform a search on the online library catalog and a few of the key online databases available through the MJC Library. Talk to a librarian. Does it look like you’ll have a problem securing enough sources of information in the time you have allotted?

### Is the available information on this topic scholarly enough for college-level research? (Quality)

- All information is NOT created equal. What did you find when you did your initial search? If all you can find is a Wikipedia entry and a few letters to the editor, then perhaps you should look toward another topic.

## Topic Selection: Further Topic Development

Choosing one or two potential topics is a good first step. The essential next step involves doing some preliminary investigation on your topics before you commit to the topic. This preliminary investigation will help you as you begin to narrow your topic into a manageable focus, and, ultimately, help you formulate your working thesis. We will talk about focusing and thesis development strategies next week.