

Worksheet for Choosing a Research Paper Topic & Developing a Thesis Statement

Step #1—Beginning your research

What is your research goal or assignment? Make sure you understand the assignment	
How many pages do you need to write?	
What sources can you use (reference, primary, secondary, periodical articles, audio-visual materials)?	

Step #2—Focusing

- Choose a topic that interests you and will sustain your interest
- Keep the topic manageable--narrow and focused enough to be interesting, but broad enough to find enough information for the assignment
- Narrow your topic by geographic region, culture, time frame, event or aspect, discipline or subject, person or group
- Look for "a point you can argue for or against, an idea you can compare or contrast, a cause and effect relationship you can explain, a main point that can be divided into sub-points, or a question you can answer"
- Think like a journalist to probe your topic more closely with the following questions: who?, what?, when?, where?, how?, and why?
- Be aware that local information may be more difficult to find—you will have to use local sources (academic or public libraries, historical societies, etc.)
- Be flexible--the topic might need to be modified (narrowed or broadened) depending on the information available
- Brainstorm your ideas by writing them down—let your thoughts flow—list 3 possible topical ideas below:

General Topic Ideas--Brainstorming	Can you narrow the topic by geographic region, culture, time frame, event or aspect, discipline or subject, person or group, etc.?

Step #3—Exploring

- Discuss your ideas with your teacher or a reference librarian
- Browse your text book and previous issues of the Buttonball Papers for ideas
- Read a general encyclopedia article (World Book, Britannica) on your top three ideas for background information
- Browse in specialized reference sources and research databases that include reference sources for ideas and background information
- Pick out major concepts or keywords from every source you browse-- identify synonyms and broader and narrower terms
- Collect these keywords for later research—they are excellent search terms
- Test your topics by searching the catalog (for books) or research databases (for articles) to determine how much information is readily available on them

Refined Topics	Sources consulted for ideas	Keywords, synonyms identified	Boyden Catalog results

Step #4—Developing a thesis statement

- As you are read about the topic you have chosen, write down questions that come to mind about the topic
- Define your topic as a focused research question
- Compose a draft thesis statement—one or two sentences that convey the focus, purpose, and meaning of your research
- A thesis statement:
 1. “is specific”
 2. “is an assertion, not a statement of fact or observation”
 3. “takes a stand rather than announces a subject”
 4. “is the main idea, not the title” of the paper,
 5. is sufficiently narrow so that it can be supported (LEO)
 6. “makes a promise to the reader about the scope, purpose, and direction of your paper”
 7. “identifies the relationships between the pieces of evidence that you are using to support your argument”
 8. “states the conclusions that you have reached about your topic” (The Writing Center)
- While you are conducting your research, ask yourself how the information you are gathering helps to answer your research question or support your thesis statement
- The thesis may evolve as you “develop new insights, find new evidence, or take a different approach to your topic” (The Writing Center)

Final Topic	Thesis Statement

Step #5—Committing to your topic/Changing your topic

- According to *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, “the process of finding sources, forming a hypothesis, and crafting a proposal will test the viability of your topic”
- If through this process, you find you are no longer interested in your topic, find another one
- If you must abandon your topic, **DO IT EARLY RATHER THAN LATER**—it will be much more difficult to start anew if you wait
- Maintaining an interest your topic is crucial to a successful research project

SEE THE U.S. HISTORY RESEARCH GUIDE FOR USEFUL LINKS FOR:

Writing a research paper
How to take efficient notes
Choosing a topic
Formulating a thesis statement
Examples of thesis statements
Citing sources
Plagiarism
And more

Sources:

Define Your Topic (NC State) <http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/lobo2/rstrategy/define-topic3a.php>
Developing a Thesis Statement (The Writing Center: U. of Wisconsin-Madison) http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/thesis_def.html
How to Write a Thesis Statement http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/thesis_statement.shtml
The Journalist’s Questions <http://www.powa.org/content/view/218/104/>
Thesis Statement (LEO: Literacy Education Online) <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/acadwrite/thesistatement.html>
Writing History: A Guide for Students, by William Kelleher Storey (907.2 S884w)