



Finding a Topic

Having Ideas

There are a few people who always seem to have confidence that, no matter what, they will figure out the perfect thing to write about the day before their papers are due. But most of us approach deadlines with a certain amount of insecurity. It's not uncommon for students to feel paralyzed by paper assignments, certain that they have nothing original (or perhaps nothing at all) to say.

Fortunately, this is usually not a genuine problem. That is to say, getting an idea about something you read or something you hear in a lecture is not difficult. It's next to impossible *not* to have ideas about those things. If you have ever tried to meditate, you know that you are supposed to try to clear your mind of all stray thoughts constantly passing through it; you also know that it takes a lot of effort and a lot of practice to achieve such a state. Writing is a bit like that.

Then why do people feel as if they have no ideas? When someone has this feeling, what she is probably worried about is not failing to have an idea, but failing to have a *good* idea. The meditation analogy applies here, too. When you meditate, what goes through your head is rarely equations of quantum theory, thoughts about medieval history, or novel theories about how plants grow. Mostly what goes through your head seems like a lot of nonsense.

The worry that you have no ideas, then, is often a worry about starting a paper that may not be a success. And your anxiety about writing may also be magnified by your concern about what is expected of students at Princeton. But having shifted the original problem of having ideas to this new problem of facing a project without the security of success, we are in a better place, because even if most of our ideas are not very good, many bad ideas can be improved. In fact, writing an essay is essentially taking an idea and improving it through a process of rewriting and revision. So, although the anxiety of starting a paper may not go away—and you may continue to worry that you have nothing to say—you can remind yourself that actually you probably have lots to say, though some of it may not be very interesting or relevant. Keep in mind as you begin work on a paper that if some of what you have to say may not be interesting as it first occurs to you, it may be very interesting by the time you get through with it.

Give Yourself Time to Think and Write

The short, hard truth is that coming up with a good paper topic rarely happens in an instant. Writing is like sculpting rather than like archery; you can begin with something crude and rough and end up with something great. Writing is a slow process that takes time and labor; it's *not* like

attempting to hit the bull's eye with your first shot. So plan ahead and schedule yourself some time to think, to read, to talk over your ideas, and to do some exploratory writing.

For many people, coming up with an idea to write about begins by wondering about something they have heard or read. You don't have to have a clearly articulated claim in order to write. Great ideas are often those that come out of being puzzled or confused about something that no one else has noticed. If you've ever wondered about something related to your general topic, try to formulate your thought as a question. Then think and write about that. Trying to answer the question may lead you to an idea that will make a good paper topic, and sometimes writing about the confusion itself can be interesting and illuminating to others.

Assigned Topics

Often, your professor or preceptor will give you a specific assignment or ask you to choose from among a few topics. Initially, this may seem easier than coming up with a topic completely on your own, but that isn't always so. Sometimes students see paper topics as challenging them to figure out "what the professor wants," or they get confused by the language used in the assignment. There is never a single, "correct" answer to a paper assignment. Rather, papers are an opportunity for you to demonstrate your ability to explain or interpret course material. Usually, a paper assignment will use certain key words that indicate the kind of essay the instructor expects. Read the assignment carefully and look for directions such as "summarize," "argue," "compare and contrast," "analyze," or "discuss." These terms suggest a particular way of structuring your ideas and choosing the content of your essay. A term like "discuss" may seem vague, however, because the appropriate content and structure of a "discussion" varies from field to field; you might want to review the texts you've been using in the course to get a sense of what constitutes a "discussion," or ask your professor or preceptor for guidance. If an assignment includes a list of questions in connection with a topic, you need to read the directions carefully to determine whether you are supposed to address all of them in your paper or only a representative few. Instructors usually provide questions as examples of how you might approach a topic, but if you are at all unsure, it is best to check.

Occasionally students have difficulty with assigned topics or essay problems because the assignment is vague. It is perfectly acceptable to ask for clarification. If you plan to talk with your professor or preceptor to discuss a paper topic, prepare for the meeting by figuring out specific questions you want to ask so that it's clear you've already done some serious work. If you want a professor to explain an assignment that seems unclear to you, for instance, you could describe several approaches you've considered and ask which one is most appropriate. Writing Center tutors can help you to interpret assignments and discuss topics, or they can advise you as you prepare for a meeting with a professor or preceptor.

There may be times when you are frustrated with a paper assignment because the choice of topics doesn't inspire you. Two options in this case are to approach the assignment as an exercise and pick the topic on which you think you can write the best essay, or to propose a new topic. If you have an idea for a paper that is different from the topic assigned, you should write it down and meet with your professor to discuss whether it is appropriate and viable.

Narrowing Your Topic

You also need to keep in mind the length of your paper as you choose a topic. If your professor asks you to analyze the relative merits of three specific articles on the Russian economy in 5-7 pages, you don't have to worry about defining the scope of your project, but frequently, assignments are not this narrow. Suppose, for instance, that an assignment for your history seminar asks you to explain one cause of the American Civil War in 5 pages. You will have to focus your topic so that you can discuss a single idea thoroughly in 5 pages instead of trying to gloss over all current theories about causes of the war. But even a topic that appears narrow at first may turn out to be too broad. If you only have 5 pages to fill, instead of trying to write about the entire Abolitionist movement, you might want to focus on one or two Abolitionist tracts that led to the Civil War. *That* is a topic that you can discuss in detail in 5 pages.

Finding a Topic on Your Own

Sometimes you will be asked to find your own topic within a general area, such as abnormal psychology or 19th-century American novels. When faced with this prospect, think about what most interests you. Ask yourself if there is a particular aspect of abnormal psychology that fascinates you, or a group of novels you would like to research. Or, you can think about some issues related to the course that have piqued your curiosity. Questions or problems are a great place to find a good topic because something that puzzles you may puzzle others.

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