

How to Refine Your Topic

Once you have read some background information, you can **refine your broad research topic** into a narrow, focused topic. The sooner you can develop a broad subject into a focused topic, the sooner you can shape your research into a finished paper. On the other hand, if you start out **too focused or detailed**, you may have a hard time finding enough sources to write an acceptable paper.

Research Tip: A topic is probably too broad if you can state it in four or five words. You can narrow a subject or topic by adding words that will eventually help you make a claim in your thesis statement or help you ask a question if you are developing a research question. Consider using words like *conflict, description (describe), contribution (contribute), or development (develop)*. If you narrow a topic by using nouns derived from verbs, you will be one step closer to a claim that could be challenging enough to keep you and your evaluator interested.

Narrowing a Subject to a Manageable Topic: A topic that covers **too much material** is a common problem for students. Depending on your interests, a general topic can be focused in many ways. For example, if you want to write a paper on government funding for the arts, consider the following questions:

- What do you already know about this subject?
- Is there a specific **time period** that you want to cover?
- Is there a **geographic region or country** on which you would like to focus?
- Is there a **particular aspect** of this topic that interests you? For example, public policy implications, historical influence, sociological aspects, psychological angles, specific groups or individuals involved in the topic, etc.

Consider creating a table or grid to use as a template for narrowing your subject into a manageable topic:

General Subject	Government Funding of the Arts
Time	1930s
Place	USA
Event or Aspects	New Deal, paint, painting, artists
Narrowed Topic	Federal funding of artists through New Deal programs and how the Works Progress Administration contributed to the country's sense of well being during the depression.

Topics that are too narrow: Think of parallel and broader associations for your subject if you need a broader topic that will be easier to research. Sometimes a topic may be too new and sources to your research questions may not yet exist.

For example, if you want to do a paper on the effect of deforestation on Colombia's long-term ability to feed its citizens, consider the following questions:

- Could you examine other countries or regions in addition to Colombia?
- Could you think more broadly about this topic? Give thought to wider topics like agriculture and sustainable development.
- Who are the key players in this topic? The government? Citizens? International organizations?
- What other issues are involved in this topic? For example, how can natural resources be allocated most economically to sustain the populace of Colombia?

Specific Topic	What is the effect of de-forestation on Columbia's long-term ability to feed its citizens?
Alternative Focus	Agriculture, sustainable development
Alternative Place	South America
Alternative Person or Group	United Nations and its subgroups
Alternative Event or Aspect	Birth Control
Broadened Topic	How can the United Nations encourage South American countries to employ sustainable development practices?

Research Tip: You have likely narrowed your topic too severely if you cannot easily find resources.

Work Space: Practice narrowing your topic in the space below. Make several attempts—no one narrows a topic on the very first try: