Choosing a Topic and Creating a Thesis Statement

Step 1: Remember that writing is a process.

Invention/pre-writing > Planning > Drafting > Revising > Editing > Proofreading

Don’t try to work through all of these stages in one sitting; start early and visit the stages at different times.

These stages are fluid and often overlap; you won’t go through them in the same order for every paper you write. This is particularly true for research papers; you may find as you are drafting or revising that you need to go back to do some more research and planning.

The Writing Center is a great place to talk over your ideas at any stage of the process—especially if you are having trouble getting started.

Step 2: Choosing a topic.

Even if you’ve been assigned to write about a specific topic, look for ways to link that topic to something that really interests you. The more interested you are in your topic, the easier it will be to spend time thinking and writing about it.

Brainstorm a list of several topics before you decide upon one. (Please refer to handout on mindmapping and brainstorm on the Writing Center website for tips on how to do this.)

Select the topic that will fit the assignment and that most interests you.

Step 3: Narrowing a topic.

Once you’ve selected a topic, you will probably need to narrow it. Often, the broader your topic, the more difficult it is to write about it.
Most people start with a topic that is pretty general; this can work well for research, as it allows you to read about your topic before narrowing your focus or forming an opinion or argument about the topic. At some point, however, you will need to narrow or focus what you want to say about the topic.

As a general guideline, keep in mind that short writing assignments should have very narrow topics. The longer the assignment, typically the broader you can make your topic.

Step 4: Form a thesis.
Your thesis tells the reader what you plan to say about your topic. It is even narrower than your focused topic.

Topic vs. Thesis

Topic: subject you are asked to write about
Example: How do other professional interests, activities, or roles inform writing center work?

Thesis: supportable statement(s) that make a claim about the topic
“Road-map” thesis: supportable statement(s) that make a claim about the topic and indicate how the writer will support that claim
Example: The basic organizational structures and governing rules in musical compositions are similar to those in linguistic compositions. While theses, academic voice, or dependent clauses may not be concepts developing writers can relate to, music, often referred to as “a universal language,” offers a productive analogy for many writers.

Support: statements or paragraphs that shore up the thesis through elaboration and detailed examples
Example: (topic sentences)
(1) The first thing composers in both mediums must consider is audience.
(2) Writing tutors can compare an essay to a pop song, its thesis to the chorus when working with developing writers who have no formal musical training.
(3) These same principles apply when working with developing writers who have studied music formally.
(4) The ability to put all of these elements together in an aesthetic and meaningful way – whether in music or language – takes regular practice.