

Finding a Topic

Practical Considerations

- With your topic, can you master a reasonable amount of information on it in the time you have?
 - **NO:** the history of scientific writing
 - **YES:** essays in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* (1675-1750) as precursors to the modern scientific article
- What kind of evidence will your readers expect you to provide in support of your claim? Will you be able to find that evidence?

From Interests to a Focused Topic

- Try to find things that interest you. It will help make your topic easier to write about.
 - Also consider what would interest others.
- Narrow your topic.
 - Your topic is probably too broad if you can state it in four to five words.
 - Example: Free will in Tolstoy
- Try stating your topic as a sentence. This can help you determine if it will be specific/interesting.
 - **Broad:** Free will in Tolstoy (topic) ⇒ There is free will in Tolstoy's novels. (sentence)
 - **Specific:** The conflict of free will and inevitability in Tolstoy's description of three battles in *War and Peace* (topic) ⇒ In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy describes three battles in which free will and inevitability conflict. (sentence)

From Topics to Questions

- Ask about the history of your topic
 - Why did your topic come into being?
 - What's its own internal history?
- Ask about your topic's structure and composition
 - How does your topic fit into the context of a larger structure?
 - How do its parts fit together as a system?
- Ask about how your topic is categorized
 - Can your topic be grouped into kinds?
 - How does it compare to and contrast with others like it?

The Most Important Question: So What?

- Is your research question worth answering?
- What will be lost if you can't answer your question?

Formulating A Clear Topic

- Name your topic, say what you want to learn about it (the question you want to answer), and state its significance (answer "so what?")
 - **Topic:** "I am studying..."
 - **Question:** "...because I want to find out what/why/how..."
 - **Significance (So what?):** "...in order to help my reader understand..."
- Example:
 - **Topic:** "I am studying Lincoln's beliefs about predestination and their influence on his reasoning"
 - **Question:** "because I want to find out how his belief in destiny and God's will influenced his understanding of the causes of the Civil War,"
 - **Significance:** "in order to help my reader understand how his religious beliefs may have influenced his military decisions."