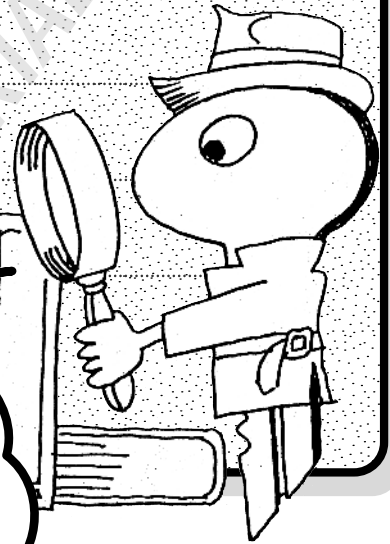


KEY 1

FIND A TOPIC

- ✓ **Which Topics Work (and Which Ones Don't)**
- ✓ **The Right Topic for You**
- ✓ **Narrow Your Topic**
- ✓ **Schedule Your Work**

Writing a research paper is a big job. However, you can make it easier by breaking it into smaller parts. The place to start is by answering the question, "What's it all about?"

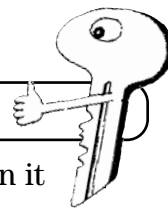


If your teacher has already chosen a topic, your first job has been done for you. But many teachers leave this job—or at least part of it—up to you. Your teacher may give you an assignment such as, “Write a research paper on any topic you choose.” Or, she or he may give you a general topic but leave the specific topic up to you: “Write a research paper on a topic related to the American Revolution.” You are not expected to find out everything about the American Revolution, of

course. Rather, your teacher expects you to think about what you've already learned about this large, general topic and then focus on some specific part of it in your paper.

Although choosing your own topic is more work than having a topic given to you, the extra thought allows you to find a topic you're truly interested in and will enjoy learning and writing about. Try to think of it as having a world of possibilities at your fingertips.

Which Topics Work (and Which Ones Don't)



The job of choosing a topic for a research paper is bigger than it sounds, especially if your teacher has given you free range. You can make it easier by keeping these simple guidelines in mind.

What Interests You

Some students think that the best way to choose a topic is to find one that sounds easy. Choosing an easy topic may backfire, however, if the topic doesn't interest you all that much. Remember that you'll be living with this assignment for several days, or even weeks. Think how sorry you will be after four or five days of thinking, reading, and writing about a topic that you find boring.

What can you do if the assigned topic just doesn't grab your interest? One alternative you can try is talking with your teacher about writing your paper on a similar topic in the same subject area. First, write down an alternative "assignment" to show your teacher. Then, tell your teacher that if he or she approves, you would like to write your paper on this similar topic. (Be sure to make it clear that you are willing to do the original assignment, even if the teacher does not approve your alternative approach.) If the teacher does not approve your suggestion, he or she has a good reason for that, so try to be understanding.

Many students are surprised to find that they become more interested in a topic after they've learned more about it—even when they did not expect to enjoy it. If you're stuck with a topic that makes your eyes glaze over, try discussing the topic with others who may help you find a more interesting angle. You also might try thinking about what makes this topic interesting to other people. As you find out more, you may discover something there that interests you after all.

What You Can Handle

Some topics are hard to handle because they are too large, or *broad*. “The American Revolution” is an example of such a topic. Seasoned scholars have written volumes on this subject, but no single person can cover every aspect of this major event in just one paper. Instead, focus on narrowing down your topic to answer favorite questions you may



have about the topic, such as “The Causes of the American Revolution” or “The Battle of Lexington and Concord.”

Another example of a topic that is too broad is “Plants.” The study of plants—also called *botany*—is a whole branch of science in itself. Someone who wants to write about plants, however, might pick a narrower topic such as “Carnivorous Plants” or “Plants of the Arctic.” (You’ll learn more about how to narrow a topic later in this chapter.)

Choosing a topic that is *too* narrow is hard to do. (Most topics—even very narrow ones—seem to get bigger as you start finding out more about them.) However, some topics can be too limiting. For example, while you could probably find plenty to say about “Cacti” and even about one particular kind of cactus, such as “The Saguaro Cactus,” you might have trouble writing more than a page or so on “Comparative Heights of Saguaro Cacti.” Picking a topic that’s too narrow is unlikely, but watch out for it anyway.

What You Can Find Enough Information About

Suppose you’ve identified a topic that you find interesting and that seems to be neither too broad nor too narrow. Before you say, “This is it!” ask yourself the question, “Can I find enough information on this topic?” For example, maybe you read the science section of your local newspaper last week and were fascinated by an article on new findings about the planet Mars. Even though that topic could be the basis of a great paper, the only information available might be the article you read and one highly technical report written by a group of space scientists.

Another pitfall is that you might choose a topic that’s interesting to so few individuals (besides yourself) that only a few experts have written about it. For example, if you chose to write about your neighbor’s newest invention, you would find very little written about it other than, perhaps, your neighbor’s own personal writing. Either way, choosing a

topic you can't find out enough about can cause you more work than you bargained for.

How can you know whether you'll be able to find enough information about a topic? This is the time to do some *preliminary research*. Start with a good encyclopedia, which you can find in the library or online. If your family owns its own encyclopedia, start there. Look up your topic to see if there is a good-sized article about it. If so, this is one sign that you can find sufficient information. Another important sign to look for is a list at the end of the article, one that includes related subjects in the encyclopedia. If you find such a list, look up some of the related subjects to see if they yield other useful information.

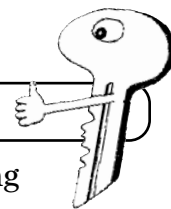
Next, check out your school or local library catalog. Finding at least three books about your topic is another encouraging sign. Take a little time to look through some of the books you find listed. (If you need help locating books in the library, you can ask a librarian.)

This is not the time to read a whole book or start taking notes, but you can decide now whether the available information on your topic is on the right level for you. A good way to judge the writing level of a book is by looking at the first page and then opening the book at random to pages in the middle and toward the end. By skimming several pages, you should be able to see if the book is on your level—not too easy or too hard.

Finally, log on to the Internet. Use a search engine to do a *keyword* search, with your topic as the keyword. See what comes up. Are there many Web sites? Read the descriptions of some of the available sites. Do they sound promising? Visit a few of the sites that you think might be helpful. Are they well organized and easy to follow? Do they give information you can use?

If the books and Web sites you find are too difficult or too technical, or if you don't find enough information on your topic, then the topic is probably not right for you. It's time to go back to square one and look for a new topic.

The Right Topic for You



Choosing the topic that is right for you is crucial. By following these steps for finding a topic, you will be able to find one on which you can gather plenty of information, that you find interesting, and that is neither too broad nor too narrow.

An Idea Web

You may have made an idea web before and referred to it as a “cluster” or an “idea map.” Because a web is a way of organizing your ideas visually, it’s one kind of *graphic organizer*. An idea web can be an extremely efficient tool for finding a topic that interests you. It works on the assumption that one idea leads to another.

To make an idea web, you need a blank sheet of paper that’s at least $8\frac{1}{2}'' \times 11''$ (the size of a standard sheet of notebook paper). Begin by drawing a circle in the middle of your paper. Then, in the circle, write the first topic you can think of, even if it’s not a topic you’re actually considering. As other related topics come to your mind, write them in smaller circles surrounding the original circle. Draw lines leading from the original circle to the smaller circles. But don’t stop there!

The ideas in the small circles can lead to yet more ideas, which you can write in even smaller circles. Eventually, you’ll write an idea in a little circle out near one of the corners of your paper. That idea will click for you.

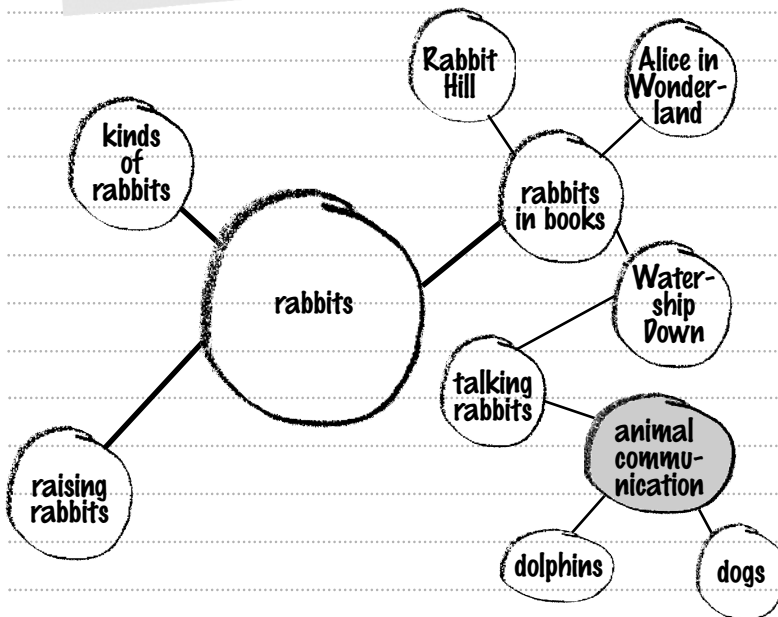
Brainstorming

Have you ever sat down with a group and talked until you’ve come up with an idea for a project you are working on, whether it was to plan a trip or organize a party? Then you were *brainstorming*. As all of you kept talking, group members may have come up with new ideas that

WRITING IT RIGHT

Model Idea Web

The following idea web models the ideas of a student who is narrowing down the general topic of "Animals."



seemed silly or impractical, but one idea led to another, and you eventually hit on an idea that worked.

Brainstorming a topic for a research paper works the same way, except that you do it by yourself, and you use a pencil and paper. Start by writing down the first topic that comes into your head, then the second, the one after that, and so on. Try to free your mind and let the ideas come. Without worrying whether anyone will see what you write, add everything that comes to mind to your list. It doesn't matter if some of your ideas are completely ridiculous. There's an excellent chance that all the ideas that don't work will eventually lead to (at least!) one idea that does.

Freewriting

If you've tried brainstorming, but your brain just isn't "storming" along, try a similar method called *freewriting*. Simply start writing down the thoughts that come to your mind, and then don't stop! Keep writing, no matter what! As one thought flows freely into another, you'll begin to make connections to ideas that interest you. Eventually, you may find yourself writing down several ideas that you find appealing. Review your freewriting and underline the ideas that interest you most. Write more about these ideas until you find your topic.



Idea Webs versus Brainstorms

The main difference between an idea web and a brainstorm is that an idea web flows from one related topic to another. Although brainstorming includes a wide variety of ideas, they are not necessarily "connected" to one another.

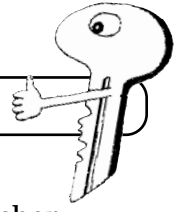
WRITING IT RIGHT

Model Freewriting

Here are the thoughts of a student who used freewriting to arrive at a topic on animal communication.

Help! I can't think of a topic. Everything I can think of seems stupid, but I'll just write it down anyway. OK, here goes. I could write about, uh, rabbits! That's the first thing I thought of. Maybe because I just read that book about rabbits called Watership Down. The rabbits in the book could talk. Rabbit communication—I don't think I'll find much on that. But what about other animals? Forget that—animal communication is much too big a topic. What about dog communication? I am interested in dogs. I know my dog communicates in lots of ways. I'd like to know more about what she's trying to tell me. I think I've got my topic!

Narrow Your Topic



Earlier, this chapter talked about avoiding topics that are too broad, such as “The American Revolution.” Whether your teacher has given you a large general topic or you’ve decided on one yourself, you’ll need a few strategies for narrowing a general topic down to a size that you can manage.

Ask Questions

Begin by asking yourself questions about your general topic. For example, with the broad topic “Plants,” you might ask:

- “How do plants grow?”
- “What do plants need?”
- “How do plants survive in the desert?”
- “What are some unusual kinds of plants?”

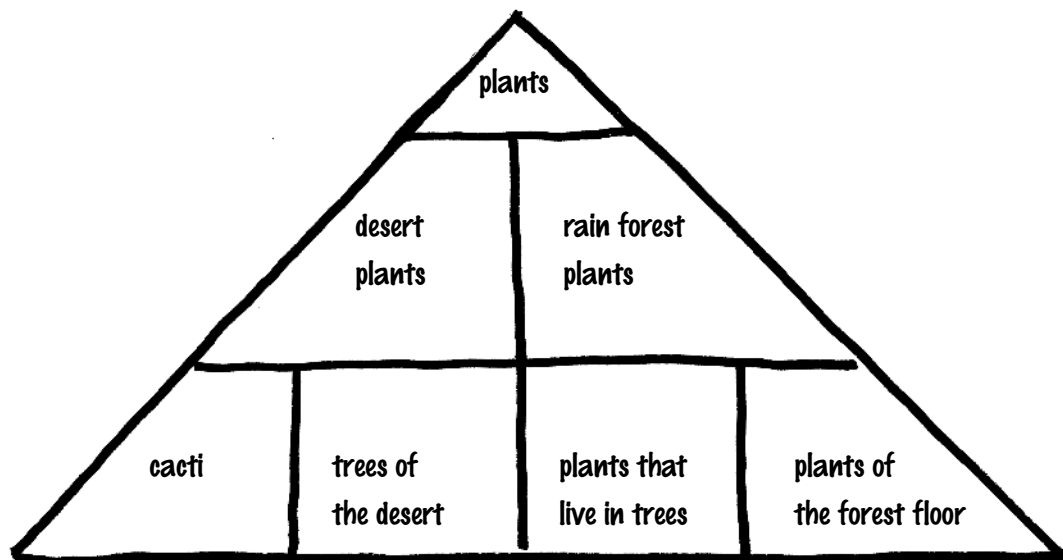
These questions could lead to topics such as “Plant Life in the Desert” or “Strange Plants—and How They Got That Way.”

Make a Pyramid Chart

If seeing your ideas organized on paper helps you think clearly, a *pyramid diagram* is a graphic organizer that can help you narrow a topic. Get a sheet of notebook paper, and in the center of the top line, write down your general topic. To continue with the same example, write “Plants” at the center of the top line. On the next line, beneath the general topic, write two topics that are smaller than the general topic; leave a small amount of space between each topic. You might write “Desert Plants” and “Rain Forest Plants.”

On the third line, write two even smaller topics beneath each of the topics on the second line. Under “Desert Plants,” you might write

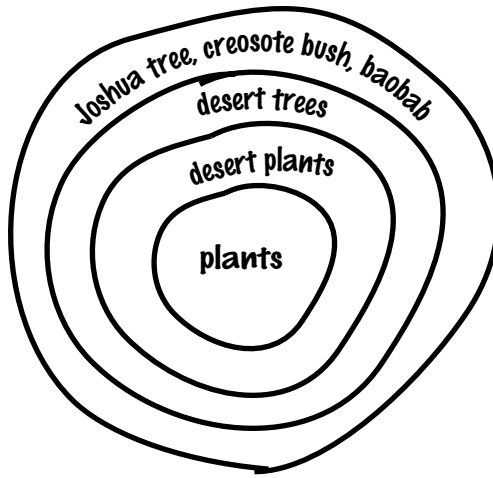
“Cacti” and “Trees of the Desert.” Beneath “Rain Forest Plants,” you might write “Plants That Live in Trees” and “Plants of the Forest Floor.” You can go on and on until you reach a topic that seems right. If you go too far, you might reach a topic that is too narrow. In that case, go up a line or two to find one that is just right.



Make a Target Diagram

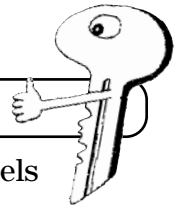
You may prefer another type of graphic organizer—the *target diagram*. A target diagram is especially useful if you want to write down more than just two ideas for each preceding idea. It allows your thoughts to flow a little more freely, and gradually you can see the direction that interests you most.

Draw a circle in the center of a sheet of paper. Around that circle, draw several larger circles so that your blank diagram looks like a target. In the central circle, write your general topic. Then, in the outer circles, start writing narrower and narrower topics until you reach one that seems just narrow enough.



You may have to add outer circles as you work. When you finish, you probably will notice that your ideas moved more in one direction than another—a helpful clue about the areas where your interests lie. You also may go beyond the topic itself (trees of the desert) to some narrower topics (Joshua tree, creosote bush, baobab), and then have to pull back a level to avoid a topic that is too narrow.

Schedule Your Work



Congratulations! If you've been following along with the models in this chapter, it's a good bet that you've succeeded in finding a good topic for your research paper. You are ready to move on to the next step: beginning your research. Take time to schedule your work, to make sure you finish your paper on time—without having to stay up late three nights in a row before the due date!

Start by making a copy of the sample Scheduling Form (Appendix A) at the back of this book. Then, write in the last thing first—**the due date**. Work backward from there, estimating the time you'll need for each task: researching and taking notes, making an outline, writing a

first draft, revising your first draft, and preparing your final presentation. In order to make realistic estimates, consider which jobs will take the most time (research and writing a first draft, probably) and which will take the least (preparing your final presentation, probably).

Stick to your schedule as closely as possible. If you find yourself moving more slowly than you expected, keep revising your schedule as you work. Remember one important thing—**the date at the end doesn't change!**



Practice Finding a Topic

1. Use a pyramid chart or a target diagram to narrow a general topic to a more manageable one. Start with a broad topic of your own choosing, or use one of the following:
 - animals
 - space
 - prehistoric times
 - music
 - holidays
 - transportation
2. Decide whether each of the following topics is too broad, too narrow, or just right for a term paper. If you are unsure, do a little research to find books or other material about the topic.
 - the history of the automobile
 - plants and animals of the Antarctic
 - European kings and queens
 - the amazing human heart
 - Egyptian hieroglyphic writing

