Finding a Focus

Narrowing and analyzing a topic is the first step you take in making the essay you are writing your own because it involves thinking and choosing, both of which will be done slightly differently by each essay writer. If you plunge into an essay on Alexander the Great without making choices about your focus, you will be much more inclined to let the secondary sources you consult do the choosing for you. It can be difficult to take notes, summarize, and quote from these sources when you have no criteria by which to decide what you need and what you do not. Lack of direction can lead to a muddled essay that is a collection of information you happened to find about Alexander the Great.

Having a narrowed, focused topic puts in place a set of criteria to help you find, select and effectively use sources. Narrowing a topic allows you to write a focused paper with a strong thesis. The kinds of topics you are given by your professors will vary from “Pick something that interests you” to a paragraph-long essay question. You must be able to deal with both.

The Broad General Topic

If you are not given an essay topic or are given general topic areas — “any topic we studied this term” or “Nietzsche,” — your first step is to narrow down the topic to something manageable, given the time, word limit, and resources you have to work with.

• “Any topic we studied this term” will obviously be narrowed down by choosing one, and even further narrowing will be probably be necessary. Try choosing something that interests you or about which you already have knowledge or strong opinions.

• “Nietzsche” might be narrowed down by questions such as these: Well, what about him? Will you look at a particular work or a particular idea in several works? Which one and why is the work/idea significant?

The questions you ask will spring from the context of the course and the ideas, themes, and emphases you have noted from course lectures, readings, and discussions. You can also consult reference tools (the library catalogue, book titles, chapter titles, tables of contents, journal article titles, subject headings) to see how a broad topic has been narrowed into sub-topics, one of which might be inspiration for a manageable, focused topic for you.

Some good questions to ask when narrowing a topic:

• Can you look at the causes of the topic? The causes of the French Revolution, or the Great Depression or Climate Change?

• Can you look at the effects of the topic? See above: the effect of the French Revolution on France or Europe or the Americas

• Are there different definitions of the topic? If you have to write an essay about Feminism in North America, you can look at different people's definitions of what feminism means.

• Narrowing by time and geography is also helpful. What time period are you looking at? Is it too long or too short? Are you looking at something all over the world or in Canada? So a huge topic like "Feminism" could become "Feminism in Postwar Canada, 1945 to 1970."

Finally, show your narrowed topic to your instructor and ask for a response.
For example: Broad Topic to Narrowed Topic
The following attempts to show the process of narrowing a broad topic through interrogating it.

Broad Topic: Development, democracy, and human rights
This topic is for an essay for an International Development Studies course, 3rd year; 3,000 words.

1. Development, democracy, and human rights
(What does each term mean? The first thing to do is to look up each one’s definition) (They seem related in some way. I will look at what way they are related.)

2. Development, democracy, and human rights: mutually reinforcing concepts for development
(In what context and time period will I be examining them?)

3. Development, democracy, and human rights in the new millennium: mutually reinforcing
(Is this true or is there more to it? This is a fairly lengthy essay so I will have time to develop some complexity. Is there an alternative way to interpret their relationship?)

Final Narrowed Topic:
Development, democracy, and human rights in the new millennium: Mutually reinforcing or a cover for disempowering market reform?

The Assigned Topic or Topic Question
In your first year, you are likely to be assigned a topic or given a list of topics from which to choose. The trick with assigned topics is to use what your professor gives you to produce a focused essay that responds exactly to the requirements. The following are examples of assigned essay topics and a preliminary analysis of each.

“The role of the Spirit of Christmas Past in Dickens’ A Christmas Carol.”
A terse topic like this one can often be turned into a question: “What is the role of the Spirit of Christmas Past in . . . . . ?” This is a literary essay topic that focuses on one character and that character’s role in the entire story. Like many literary essay topics, it requires the writer to think about part of the work (one character) in relation to the whole work (the story). The writer’s task is to figure out the role of the character and how it is important to the story.

“Should the principal purpose of environmentalists be to correct the problems technology creates? Should environmentalists be proactive as well as reactive? If they are proactive, are they not seeking to dominate and control nature in much the same way as industrial technology does?”
This topic is a series of three questions, each of which requires an answer involving the writer’s evaluation and opinion. It is consciously designed to elicit a focused, manageable essay. The writer is required to provide an answer for each question with appropriate support. However, the essay must be more than a list of answers; the writer will need a thesis that somehow connects or shows the relationship between the answers.
“The Government of Canada has proposed to pass legislation granting self-government rights to aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal leaders have sought constitutional entrenchment of an inherent right to self-government. What are the differences between these two positions which make a compromise solution difficult to achieve?”

The first two sentences of this topic describe two positions. The final question is designed to elicit a focused essay. The writer’s task is to describe, not the differences between the positions, but those differences which make a compromise solution difficult to achieve. That final question precisely focuses the topic; the writer simply has to realize it.

Assigned topics often do the narrowing for the writer. Your task is to read the assigned topic attentively and analytically, underlining or highlighting the key words, and noting what sections and subsections are suggested in order to respond to each of them.

Developing a Thesis

A good thesis is a continuation of a good topic; it individualizes your essay. Your thesis statement offers your substantiated opinion (after consideration, thought and some research). All of your essay develops and supports your thesis and shows how and why your thesis is valid. As you go through your sources (reading, taking notes, learning more) you will have the criteria by which to judge what is useful to you and what is not. You need information that allows you to fully develop and support your thesis. Everything else can go. You will not be simply following wherever your sources go, taking down everything because it "might be important." Instead, you will be directing your research to support your central argument.

What is a thesis?

An essay is not a report or a collection of facts. An essay is more personal than that. Every essay must have a purpose, a particular controlling idea, position, or argument about the facts and ideas which fall under its topic. Your thesis is what you think, overall, about what you have found out; someone else doing research on exactly the same topic could come up with a different thesis. That is why you must support your thesis in the body of the essay; the bulk of the essay shows why your thesis is a valid position given what you have learned.

For example: Topic to Thesis

Topic: American involvement in the Vietnam War

Narrowed Topic: The most important cause of the escalating involvement of the US in the Vietnam War during the ‘60s

Thesis: Many have argued that the escalation of the involvement of the US in the Vietnam War during the 1960s was caused primarily by US anti-Communist policy; however, the primary cause was financial rather than ideological as the military industrial complex sought to gain wealth through increased contracts.

In the thesis, the question implicit in the topic is answered. The writer takes a stand, makes a decision about what is important or primary. Another writer might identify another cause as primary or argue that there was not one most important cause but two or three that worked together equally.
Finding a Thesis

You should attempt to establish a working thesis as early as possible in the essay-writing process. In fact, after you have a good topic to work with, your research at this stage should be focused on finding a thesis.

From the assigned topic: You may already have a broad thesis question if you have been given an assigned topic.
- Turn the statement into a question: “What is the role of the Spirit of Christmas Past in A Christmas Carol?”
  You may not yet know the answer, but a thesis will develop from the answers you find as you analyse the text. “The role of the Spirit of Christmas Past in A Christmas Carol is . . .”
- Or answer a question asked in the topic: “The differences between these two positions which make a compromise solution difficult to achieve are . . .”
  Research must focus on finding out what these differences are and how and why they make a compromise solution difficult to achieve.

The final thesis might not be as mechanical as this, but the statement provides a useful starting point towards a more original, creative one. Scrutinize your assigned topics carefully; they often point you in the direction of a thesis.

From you own topic: Even if you have to come up with a topic on your own, it should contain hints as to what a thesis might look like. Again, try to turn it into a question.

Another way to find inspiration for a thesis is to look at the theses of the texts you consult in your research. What are the arguments and opinions? What are the controversial points? Could you look at something similar?

The Thesis Statement

As soon as you can, write your thesis down in a clear thesis statement. Do not skip this step; essay writers often proceed with a vague, sort-of thesis in their heads, but this usually leads to vague, rambling essays. Putting your thesis down in a statement in print means you can stare at it, read it over to see if it makes sense, have someone else read it to see if it makes sense, change it, modify it, show it to your professor. It is there, and you have something established which you can then develop and upon which you can hang your supporting points.

A thesis statement is of great help to you and your reader. It says, “I know what I am trying to do in this essay; I have thought about it and here it is.”

A thesis statement does not have to be one sentence, although it often is. A complex idea or argument may call for two or even three sentences. For many students, coming up with one full sentence is often hard enough in itself. However, if you are having difficulty getting what you want to say into one sentence, relax and give yourself two or three sentences to get it down. Once it is written, you may be able to tighten it up, or you may keep it as a slightly longer, more complex thesis statement.

Thesis Statement Checklist

Once you have a thesis statement, read it over and evaluate it according to this checklist:

1. Is your thesis statement a statement and not a question or a purpose statement? Although a question is often the start of a thesis, your final thesis should be the answer to the question. Similarly, you may start out with a purpose or investigation, but your thesis statement should include more than your declaration of purpose:
**NO**  "This essay will examine the effects of gamma-rays on man-in-the-moon marigolds."

**YES**  "Gamma-rays cause significant mutations in man-in-the-moon marigolds."

2. Is your thesis statement brief, written preferably in one or two sentences? Although you do not always have to restrict your thesis statement to one sentence only, if you find you need three or more sentences to express it, ask yourself if you have more than one thesis or if your topic needs to be narrowed further.

3. Does your thesis statement argue something that is precise and can be supported with evidence? Avoid statements that are overly subjective, general or broad:

   **NO**  "Einstein was the greatest physicist of all time. All of his theories were, and continue to be, foolproof."

   "Greatest" is too much to be supported or proven in a single essay. It would be better to evaluate carefully Einstein's theories (or one of his theories), examining its merits in the context of physics, and indicating how it has stood the test of time.

4. Does your thesis argue something or does it just describe something non-arguable? There is a fine line between description and analysis and argument, and you want to make sure you have crossed it. Look at the following thesis statement for an English essay:

   **NO**  "Both Shakespeare's comedies, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* involve other-world settings, mistaken identities, and happy romantic endings."

   The writer of this thesis statement is probably planning a section on each item: settings, identities, and happy endings. But is there really anything argued here?

   This thesis is only descriptive; the essay writer has read both plays and is describing similarities, likely in response to a comparison topic. But in an essay, you must argue something, and that means having described something, you must push beyond the description and ask "why" questions that force you to analyze what you have found. So, the description above can be looked at as the beginnings of a thesis. Note the final thesis, where the writer is taking the description further and arguing for something that is not immediately apparent and that someone else might not see:

   **YES**  "While both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* involve other-world settings, mistaken identities, and happy romantic endings, *Twelfth Night* is, overall, a slightly darker and more wistful comedy, as it thwarts illusion more forcefully than does *A Midsummer Night's Dream.*"