Refine, narrow or broaden a research topic

How to refine your research topic: Most research topic ideas only need a bit of tweaking to make them refined and manageable. What does it mean for a topic to be manageable?

A topic should interest you personally. This might be the most important thing; you should be curious enough to want to learn much more about the topic and forming ideas about it.

A topic should not be too broad or too narrow. Searching on a topic that is too broad will be burdened quite literally by TMI: Too much information. On the other hand, a topic that is way too specific will make finding sources on the topic extremely difficult and writing enough about it to meet your page length requirement.

Narrowing a topic that is too broad.

Example: “I am thinking of doing a paper on people’s poor health.”

Define your topic by asking the following questions:

- When you think of this broad topic, what specific issues interest you – careers in health care, specific disorders or diseases, the state of health care in the United States? All of these subtopics are facets of the much broader topic – health.
- What aspects of your topic interest you: business, history, legal, physical, psychological, social etc.?
- What time period do you want to cover?
- Do you want to focus on a geographic region or population?
- What kind of information do you need? (e.g., a brief summary or a lengthy explanation; periodical articles or books; statistics)

To break this down, ask the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What branches of the topic are there?</th>
<th>Autism, cancer, depression, anorexia, health care, advertisements/media?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What subjects might the topic involve?</td>
<td>Business, history, legal, physical, psychological, social</td>
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Narrowed research question: Does the media’s portrayal of the ideal female body contribute to eating disorders in women?
**Broaden your topic**

Example: “I am thinking of doing a paper on how fishing in the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland has affected the smallmouth bass population.”

The topic above is seeking to answer a question for which there may be no answer yet – there may be no or very little research or studies that have been conducted on this topic. How can this be turned into a more manageable topic?

**Hint:** Look for parallels and opportunities for broader associations:

- Rather than concentrate on a specific species of fish, examine more broad fish populations such as freshwater fish or saltwater fish.
- Examine larger geographic regions that are affected such as the United States.
- Identify the people or groups that encompass this topic such as fishermen or fish & wildlife government departments.
- Brainstorm for other issues related to this topic such as fishery management, fishery regulations, fishing licenses, fish stocking, etc.

To break this down, ask the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternate focus:</th>
<th>freshwater fish, saltwater fish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternate Place:</td>
<td>Southeastern United States, United States, rivers, oceans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorm Focus on Group or Person</td>
<td>fishermen, fish &amp; wildlife government departments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorm Focus on Aspect or Event</td>
<td>fishery management, fishery regulations, fishing licenses, fish stocking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Broadened research question:** How have government fishing regulations in the United States affected the freshwater fish population?