From Topic to Research Question to Thesis

The sooner you settle on a topic, the more time you will have for developing a strong thesis statement, researching your topic, and writing your essay. The goal of this section is to help you identify the topic, purpose, and focus of your paper by

1. choosing a topic that interests you,
2. posing research questions about your chosen topic,
3. generating answers to research questions, and
4. forming a thesis statement.

Since this is a step-by-step process, and you are reading this, you are likely trying to develop a topic and a thesis statement; therefore, you will be pausing at certain points in the reading to practice these steps. These practice exercises are in italics below.

Most of the papers you will write in college will be research papers. What is a research paper? Simply put, it is a paper that uses information collected through research to make a point. A research paper is NOT

1. everything you can find on a topic,
2. what others have said without your own analysis and interpretation,
3. one person's view on a topic, or
4. only the material out there that supports your preconceived opinion.

Choosing a Topic

The topic you choose for a research paper should be reasonably narrow (e.g., "depression" is too general, but "treatments for depression, past, present, and future" or "preventing suicide in people with depression" are suitably narrow); it should not be so new that little has been written on it and not so controversial as to have largely biased sources. "Conspiracy" topics (Kennedy assassination, who-knew-what pre-9/11, UFOs) should also be avoided, as credible sources on these topics are hard to find.

So, how does one choose a topic? If you are generating your own topic, a good way to come up with one is to think about your own hobbies or career interests and then see how they might expand into a topic. If you must choose from a list of topics, it is still important to choose one that interests you.

Whatever topic you choose, it needs to be the following:

1. Interesting: It should appeal both to you and to your reader (a good writer can make a reader care passionately about moss).
2. Researchable: It should be such a good idea that others have addressed this topic.
3. Based on fact, not just opinion: Why Britney Spears is the best singer ever is not an acceptable topic.
4. Important: It is important in the sense that your reader should think the topic is worthy of being written about, not necessarily in that it will change the world. Do not write a paper in which the main point is that milk is white (although a paper on why milk is white might be interesting).

Open a new Word document. Identify at least two topics that you might consider for your research paper. For each topic, briefly explain how it measures up using the above criteria: interesting, researchable, based on fact and not opinion, and important.

Posing a Research Question

Once you have a topic, the next step is to develop a research question. A research question helps you focus or narrow the scope of your topic by identifying more specifically what aspect or area of the topic interests you. Here are some examples:

**Topic:** Photography
**Research questions:**
What ethics should guide photojournalists in war zones?
Who are America's ground-breaking photographers?
Should photography be considered an art form?

**Topic:** Media violence
**Research Questions:**
What impact does television violence have on children?
Should evening newscasts limit the amount of graphic violence presented to viewers?
How does television violence affect ratings?

**Topic:** College athletics
**Research Questions:**
Should college athletes be paid for playing?
Should college coaches be held responsible for their players' behavior off the field or court?
How do colleges bend the rules for star athletes?

**Topic:** Careers
**Research Questions:**
What do career counselors do?
What jobs are most likely to be underpaid and under-appreciated?
Can someone expect to have a successful career without a college education?

Return to your Word document. Using one of the topics you identified in the previous exercise (the one that seems most interesting to you is probably the best choice), pose three research questions such as those shown above.

Forming a Thesis

What is a thesis? A thesis helps the writer maintain his or her focus by summarizing the main point of the research paper and should

1. be a complete sentence
2. identify the topic, and
3. make a specific assertion or point about that topic.

A thesis may also give the writer a sense of his or her principal purpose for writing.

Most papers are primarily informative or persuasive. Informative papers present research to educate readers on a particular topic or problem (See Writing an Informative Essay). Persuasive papers present research to change readers' opinions or to offer a solution to a particular problem (See Writing a Persuasive Essay).

The other thing to remember is that many research papers combine informative and persuasive elements, so it is fine if yours does as well. Odds are if you are writing a persuasive paper, you will still need to give background on the topic (an informative element). Your research, your topic, and your thesis will determine whether your paper is largely informative or persuasive.

Once you have figured out what you are asking (your research question), your thesis is simply the answer.

Here are some examples:

**Topic:** Photography
**Research question:** What ethics should guide photojournalists in war zones?
**Answer to question and thesis sentence:** Photojournalists should always be embedded with military troops for their own protection.
**Purpose:** Persuasive

**Topic:** College athletics
**Research question:** Should college athletes be paid for playing?
**Answer to question and thesis sentence:** College athletes perform a valuable service for their schools and should be paid for their performance.
**Purpose:** Persuasive

**Topic:** Media violence
**Research question:** How does television violence affect ratings?
**Answer to question and thesis sentence:** The effect of television violence on ratings has varied from decade to decade and depends on what society at large views as acceptable in each era.
**Purpose:** Informative

*Return to your Word document. In complete sentences, answer the questions you posed in the previous exercise to formulate three potential thesis statements. Then, consider what the purpose might be for each of those answers.*

Congratulations! You have completed the process and have your thesis statement!