

## **NARROWING YOUR FOCUS FOR RESEARCH (PODCAST 20 TRANSCRIPT)**

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to talk about narrowing your focus. One issue many writers face when writing, especially when writing an academic research essay, is limiting the scope of the discussion to something that is manageable. Clearly, the parameters of the assignment would dictate the scope of a subject one could realistically discuss in a paper, but even then there is often a need to limit one's focus.

If you've ever written a college essay before, I am sure you are quite familiar with the list of taboo topics instructors have. High on any list would be the issue of capital punishment. Let's say you had to write a persuasive research essay and you wanted to sound off on this controversial issue. Let's also say you were gung-ho to argue your view that capital punishment is wrong and you begin researching with gusto. When you use a library and conduct an electronic article or book search on the topic of capital punishment, what do you think you will find?

Oodles and oodles of content—book after book, article after article, far, far too much material to wade through even if you blocked off a month of Sundays. Why? Not because your instructor isn't interested in the issue or has read too many papers on the topic (both of which, I suppose, could be true). The real reason is that the issue of capital punishment is one that fills books—and lots of them. There is no way someone can have a meaningful discussion of this topic in the typical amount of space allotted to undergraduate research paper assignments. I am not even going to mention that the purpose of academic research is to add something new to the discussion and in all likelihood most undergraduate papers are simply going to be a rehash of already circulating discussion points. Plus, one would need a lot of space for such a discussion.

The bottom line? The issue of capital punishment is too broad (as is the case for many topics). You've got to narrow the focus to something tenable, something doable, something researchable, something that is going to have substance. Papers in which the topic is too broad lend themselves to discussions that gloss over key ideas.

So how do you know if your topic is too broad? Perhaps the best litmus paper test is to conduct a library or even an internet search on your topic. If you input your topic, press search, and get a gazillion hits, then that is telling you something, namely that your focus is too broad. Using the broad topic as a starting point, you can play around with the wording and/or key words you input to try to narrow the topic to something doable. But you need to be patient and you need to be willing to rethink your approach to the topic if you want to make any headway. In other words, narrowing your focus can take some time.

Let's say you are interested in writing about single mothers and you access a library's online database and type into the search field Single Mothers. What do you think such a search will yield? My search



flagged over 154 thousand potential hits. Far too many, right? Of course! In my second attempt, I decided to limit my search to a single electronic data base and chose Academic Search Premier. I again entered Single Mothers and got 3,170 hits, much better than my first attempt but still far too many to go through. Clearly, I have got to narrow the focus to something manageable and researchable. I can help myself by limiting my search so that only full texts in peer-reviewed sources published in the last five years are identified. After limiting the single mother search in that way, the number of hits went from 3,170 to 751, still too broad.

What my searches have indicated is using a topic like single mother is far too broad; the scope needs to be more narrowly defined to make the research doable and also—one hopes—to enable one to write a focused discussion on an aspect of the topic that will hold the audience’s interest.

So how do you narrow your topic? Let me offer some tips to make the process go a bit more easily, but remember the process will take some time.

**Tip # 1:** Think about a more particular aspect of the topic that interests you. Brainstorm a list to generate ideas. The more you can break down an issue the better, so push your exploration and try to get a good thorough list of ideas. As you conduct searches in the library, you will know if you’ve broken the topic down too much, too little, or just enough.

**Tip # 2:** Limit the focus by applying an overriding filter. Let’s say you are interested in researching violent crime, which is too broad of a focus. How can the topic “violent crime” be limited? Well, it could be limited by geographic region, culture, demographic, time period, and so on. For example, one could search for violent crime in urban areas or violent crimes committed by minors or violent crimes perpetuated by inner city gangs. You have to be careful, of course, of limiting the focus by too much, but that is something you can quickly check by conducting a library search.

**Tip #3:** Scan the library search hits for ways to narrow the focus. When I look at the list of hits on the first page for single mothers, I see articles that speak to welfare, HIV, employment opportunities for low income single mothers, poor single mothers with young children, cardiovascular disease in African-American single mothers. As you can see, the “hits” I just read more than adequately narrow the focus. Let’s see what happens when I use “poor single mothers with young children” and do a library search for full-text, peer reviewed articles in the last five years . . . and the result is that I have gone from 751 hits to 18. Eighteen. Wowie! Eighteen is a manageable number, right? You bet!

**Tip #4:** Make a list of key words related to your larger subject. If your broad subject is drunk driving, you might jot down repeat offenders, legislation, fatalities, and so on. If I use the Academic Search Premier database and limit my search to peer-reviewed full-text articles published within the last five years, I get 144 hits when I search for drunk driving. When I add the key word “fatalities,” I got eleven hits, and when I changed “fatalities” to “legislation” I got fourteen hits. And remember, this search was with one data base of electronic articles—there are others that could be searched.

**Tip #5:** Ask questions. If you are embarked on a research based writing assignment, pose research questions. What is it that you want to find out about your topic? Be sure to ask questions that do not yield a yes/no answer. Do big box stores negatively impact smaller businesses? What kinds of tax incentives do big box stores get? Do big box stores offer good employment options and benefits for



employees?

**Tip #6:** Don't be afraid to refocus your topic. Many times when you have something in mind to pursue, you do so with gusto. However, what happens if you don't quite find what you are looking for? Chances are you keep looking and looking and looking and looking—all the while growing more frustrated and impatient. Though I hate to use a cliché, learn to go with the flow. If you can't quite find what you are looking for, refocus your topic so that the research is more doable.

Writing an academic research paper has its challenges, so do yourself a favor and take the time to find a suitable topic, one that is limited in scope and manageable. The tips offered in this podcast provide some effective strategies you can easily put to use to narrow your focus.

Thanks for listening, everyone. Happy writing!

