

Research Papers: Getting Started

A. Understand the Assignment

1. When the assignment is given, take notes on what your professor expects the paper to contain and the criteria used to grade the paper.
2. If you have questions after the instructions are given, ask your professor to explain the requirements during office hours or by e-mail.
3. Read and re-read your assignment handouts and/or notes. Search for and highlight any key words that might direct you in choosing a topic that will be interesting, informative, and meet the general requirements for the assignment such as paper length, number of sources, MLA or APA style.

B. Choose a Broad Topic to Begin

1. If your professor has assigned a topic, use that. If the topic choice is yours, consider different ideas that interest you. Choose a topic that is controversial for an argumentative research paper.

Examples of Controversial Topics:

- Pros/Cons of Attending College
 - Pros/Cons of Raising the Minimum Wage
 - Pros/Cons of Stronger Gun Control Laws
 - Pros/Cons of Deporting Illegal Immigrants
2. **Do not** worry if you don't know anything about a topic! The whole purpose of a research paper is to discover new things about your topic.
 3. If you have chosen a topic, but are unsure of what facts you might include in your paper, browse some research sources to get a general overview of the information available.

Try these sources (they are **not** necessarily the ones you will cite in your paper):

- Library books
- Online library databases (Opposing Viewpoints database for Pro/Con topics)

4. Once you have decided on your topic, it's time to narrow your topic and come up with a specific research question. Then, you will start looking at **reliable** sources (usually articles from the online library databases) to cite in your paper.
 - Ask yourself: "Would this topic, supported by the information I have gathered, be interesting and informative to my instructor, my peers, or anyone else with whom I am trying to communicate my research?"
 - If your answer is yes, you are ready for the next step: narrowing your research topic.

For More Help:

- See the WRL Center handout **Narrowing Your Research Topic**.
- Come to the WRL Center workshop **Beyond Google: Academic Research & You**.
- See the Montgomery College Libraries website for some more useful handouts on the research process.