



Choose a Topic



So you have to write a research paper. You have just been handed one of the most interesting—and challenging—writing assignments of your school career. To complete the assignment on time, you will need to begin promptly and keep plugging away until you have finished. So let's get started! The first thing you will need to do is decide what you are going to write about.

Before You Begin

Make sure you understand your assignment.

A research paper is a long, formal essay or report that presents information from a number of sources. You will need to know exactly when your paper is due, how long it is supposed to be, and what type of research paper you are expected to write.

LENGTH. Your teacher may specify a paper ranging in length from 1,000 to 2,000 words (sometimes more). You can estimate 250 keyboarded words to a double-spaced page to determine the number of pages of text you will need; later, you can use your word processor's word-count tool to get a sense of your progress. Or your teacher may assign a specific number of pages—five to seven double-spaced pages of text, for example. Listen carefully to the assignment, and exactly follow the specifications (for length, topic, type of paper, and style of documentation).

Keep in mind that whenever you write a report, explain an idea, or write a memo or proposal, your writing is **expository** in nature; that is, your purpose is to inform or explain. You are not telling a story (**narrative** writing) or describing something (**descriptive** writing) or trying to convince someone to do something (**persuasive** writing). In expository writing, your purpose is chiefly to convey information to your reader.

AUDIENCE. Usually, your teacher and your classmates are your audience, but sometimes a research paper can be shared with others who are interested in your topic.

For instance, if you have written a paper about a strong-mayor versus a city-commission form of government, you might read and discuss your paper with a social studies class or send it to your local governing body. If you have written about recent legislation protecting an endangered species, you might share your findings with the school's science club or a local environmental organization.

TYPES OF RESEARCH PAPERS. Research papers, which are sometimes called *term papers*, can be classified according to their major purpose. These three types of research paper differ in important ways.

1. INFORMATIONAL, OR FACTUAL, RESEARCH PAPER. You've been writing this type of research paper ever since you wrote your first report in elementary school. In a traditional informational research paper, you present information from a number of different sources (both print and nonprint) without expressing any of your thoughts or feelings about the topic. There's no place for the first-person pronoun *I* in the informational paper. In fact, if your teacher has assigned an informational research paper, you will probably lose points for expressing your opinion or taking a position on your topic.

An informational research paper is **objective**, which means that it is completely factual and does not express your point of view. Consider, for example, these topics:

OBJECTIVE TOPIC Three states' different age requirements for teenagers to get a driver's license (**facts only**)

OBJECTIVE TOPIC History of U.S. women's professional basketball (**facts only**)

In an informational paper, your assignment is to focus the topic, find the information, and produce an organized and coherent paper. Your aim when writing this kind of paper is to *stick to the facts*.

2. EVALUATIVE, OR ANALYTICAL, RESEARCH PAPER. An evaluative research paper also presents information from a number of different sources, but it goes one step farther. In an evaluative paper, you state your opinion or come to a conclusion about your topic based on the information you have presented in your paper. This statement of opinion or conclusion is called a **claim**. Consider these claims:

CLAIM I think our state should not give driver's licenses to 16-year-olds. (**opinion**)

CLAIM The National Basketball Association should support a women's professional basketball league. (**opinion**)

CLAIM Of all the proposed solutions for increasing voter turnout in this country, only one solution is workable and likely to succeed. (**opinion**)

The topic for an evaluative paper may be a contemporary issue or a problem that interests you. You may compare and contrast two artists or writers, for example, and make a claim about whose work will have lasting value. Make sure that your teacher approves your topic before you start your research process. Your aim when writing this kind of paper is to *make a claim and support it*.

3. I-SEARCH PAPER. An I-Search paper tells the story of how you went about your research and what you discovered. You begin by thinking of a topic that you really want to learn about, often one that affects you personally.

RESEARCH QUESTION How can I become an X-ray technician, and is that a career at which I'm likely to be successful?

An I-Search paper demonstrates a definite organization, with sub-headings, like those that follow, which indicate the structure.

- What I already know
- What I want to find out
- How I went about finding out what I want to know
- What I learned

If you're writing an I-Search paper, your most important sources will be **interviews** with two or three people who are knowledgeable about the subject of your research question. For example, someone researching a career as an X-ray technician might interview a person who works as an X-ray technician and a professor who teaches a course to students learning to become X-ray technicians. A major part of your paper tells what you learned from each interview, and at the end of the I-Search paper, you draw a conclusion based on the information you gathered. Your aim when writing this kind of paper is to *tell your story*.

Hint!

Don't put yourself (*I*) in an Informational paper. *I* belongs only in evaluative and I-Search papers.

Managing Your Time

Draw up a project schedule.

A research paper is a long-term assignment. In order to see it through to a successful conclusion, you will need to plan well and keep to a schedule. Indeed, one of the most important aspects of a research paper project is time management—that is, making the most efficient use of the time available to you.

Your teacher will specify a deadline (the date on which your paper is due). You then have from the day the paper is assigned until the due date to research and write it. Therefore, your first order of business should be to draw up a project schedule. The sample timetables on page 10 give you some guidelines on how to pace yourself.

AVOID A TIME TRAP. Many teachers require that you turn in specific materials along the way—for example, an outline and a list of sources. Such minideadlines can actually help you stay focused on your task. Other teachers may assign the research paper, give you some specifications and a due date, and then leave you on your own. In that case, it's completely up to you to manage your time. Don't procrastinate. The due date may seem a long way away, but you've got lots of work to do.

KEEP PLUGGING AWAY. Don't get bogged down in one stage of the writing process, such as writing a thesis statement. If you keep working on your assignment and moving forward through each step, you will be able to meet your deadline.

Research Paper Timetables

The chart below gives four timetables, each keyed to a different due date. Do you have eight weeks to complete your paper? See the second column. Use or adapt the schedule to suit your own research paper.

STEPS					
PREWRITING		10 weeks	8 weeks	6 weeks	4 weeks
1	Choose a topic.	1 week	3 days	2 days	1 day
2	Locate sources.	3 days	3 days	2 days	1 day
3	Take notes.	2 weeks	1½ weeks	1 week	1 week
4	Write a thesis statement and a title.	3 days	2 days	1 day	1 day
5	Write a final outline.	1 week	1 week	2 days	2 days
DRAFTING					
6	Write the first draft.	1½ weeks	1 week	1 week	4 days
7	Document sources.	2 days	2 days	1 day	1 day
REVISING					
8	Revise the draft.	2 weeks	1½ weeks	1½ weeks	3 days
PROOFREADING/EDITING					
9	Find and correct errors.	2 days	2 days	2 days	1 day
PUBLISHING					
10	Publish your research.	3 days	3 days	3 days	2 days

Choosing a Topic

IF A SPECIFIC TOPIC IS ASSIGNED. Be grateful and get going. Rarely, however, does a teacher require everyone to write on the same topic. When more than one person is working on a specific topic, source materials become hard to find because several people are competing for them. Also, most teachers prefer reading about a variety of topics instead of the same one over and over.

IF THE GENERAL SUBJECT IS ASSIGNED BUT NOT THE SPECIFIC TOPIC. If your teacher assigns a general subject and lets you limit it to a workable topic, part of your job is already done. Limiting is easy once you get started. (See pages 13–15 for examples of and suggestions for cluster diagrams.)

IF IT'S TOTALLY UP TO YOU. This is the usual scenario: Your teacher lets you decide what to write about and simply requires that he or she approves your topic once you have chosen it. It is important to settle on a workable topic as soon as possible because you have a lot of work to do once you have made your choice and had it approved. (See Appendix B for suggestions for topics that might interest you.)

Hint!

You don't have to find the "perfect" topic (it probably doesn't exist anyway). You just have to find a *workable* one.

Choose a workable topic that meets all the following requirements.

1. YOU CAN FIND ENOUGH MATERIAL ON THE TOPIC. Usually, a research assignment calls for at least five diverse sources, some print and some nonprint. Sometimes, for instance, you will be expected to conduct an interview to serve as one of your sources. Avoid choosing a topic that is too recent or too technical; you will have trouble locating information. Once you have chosen a topic, do a quick check in your library or media center (see Step 2) to verify that you can find five or more reliable sources on it.

2. THE TOPIC INTERESTS YOU, AND YOU THINK YOU CAN MAKE IT INTEREST YOUR AUDIENCE. An ideal topic tickles your curiosity. You may know something about it already, but you would like to know more. After all, you are going to spend many weeks immersed in the topic. Ask yourself if you would like to become the class "expert" on this topic.

Take an interest inventory. Start by taking stock of the things you are interested in. List as many as possible. For example, you might include your hobbies; your ambitions and goals; careers you are interested in; places you would like to visit; things you are curious about (ideas; how something works and why); the biggest problems in your community, the country, the world; things you would buy if you had all the money you wanted; some famous people you admire and a word or two about why you admire each.

Look for topic ideas. Explore as many sources as you can for possible research paper topics. Browse through newspapers and magazines. Talk to relatives, friends, and experts. Interview someone. Listen to radio talk shows, National Public Radio,

and news shows. Watch TV documentaries and the evening news. Browse through the documentary section of a video store. Browse through a library or bookstore. Check out electronic magazines and newspapers on a computer. Flip through an encyclopedia. Use a search engine to browse for topics on the Internet.

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Brainstorming

Alone or with a partner or small group, brainstorm topics that interest you. On a separate sheet of paper or your computer, make a list of ideas and suggestions, including those that you gathered in your Interest Inventory. Then review the list, and choose the three topics you would most like to write about.

3. THE TOPIC IS OBJECTIVE, NOT SUBJECTIVE. Remember, an objective topic is factual, not personal. Generally, you will be writing an informational or factual research paper. You are not writing about your opinions, your experiences, your friends and relatives, or your feelings and ideas. These are subjective topics. Here are some examples of each type:

- **OBJECTIVE** Evidence for and against side airbags in cars
- **SUBJECTIVE** My uncle's car accident
- **OBJECTIVE** Signing up voters: techniques for registering new voters
- **SUBJECTIVE** What happened when I tried to register to vote

4. THE TOPIC IS LIMITED ENOUGH TO BE COVERED ADEQUATELY IN THE SPACE AVAILABLE TO YOU. You will need to focus your topic until it's just the right size. You can't, for example, write a research paper on the history of China; you would need a whole book—or several—to cover such a broad subject. Limit, or narrow, your topic to one that can be covered thoroughly in the space you have available. (On pages 13–20, you will learn some techniques for limiting a general subject.) But do not choose a topic so narrow that you can cover it completely in a paragraph or two.

- **TOO GENERAL** Ants
- **STILL TOO GENERAL** Fire ants
- **STILL TOO GENERAL** The evolution of fire ants
- **JUST RIGHT** The invasion of fire ants in the United States
- **TOO LIMITED** What to do if you are stung by a fire ant
- **TOO LIMITED** What a fire ant looks like

Hint!

If you can find a dozen books devoted to your topic, the topic is too broad and general and needs to be limited further. For example, if you choose to write about Native American mythology and find six books on that subject listed in your library's catalog, your topic needs to be narrowed further.

Online Research

Use a search engine to browse through the listings on a general topic. All search engines explore the Internet for Web pages containing information about a specified topic. It's up to you to determine which of the listings has the information you need. If you enter the word *karate* in Google, for instance, you will get more than 32 million listings, and they will all be more limited in some way than the general word *karate*. Here are some examples of more-limited topics:

history of karate

karate training and equipment

karate rules and etiquette

how karate differs from other martial arts

USA Karate Foundation

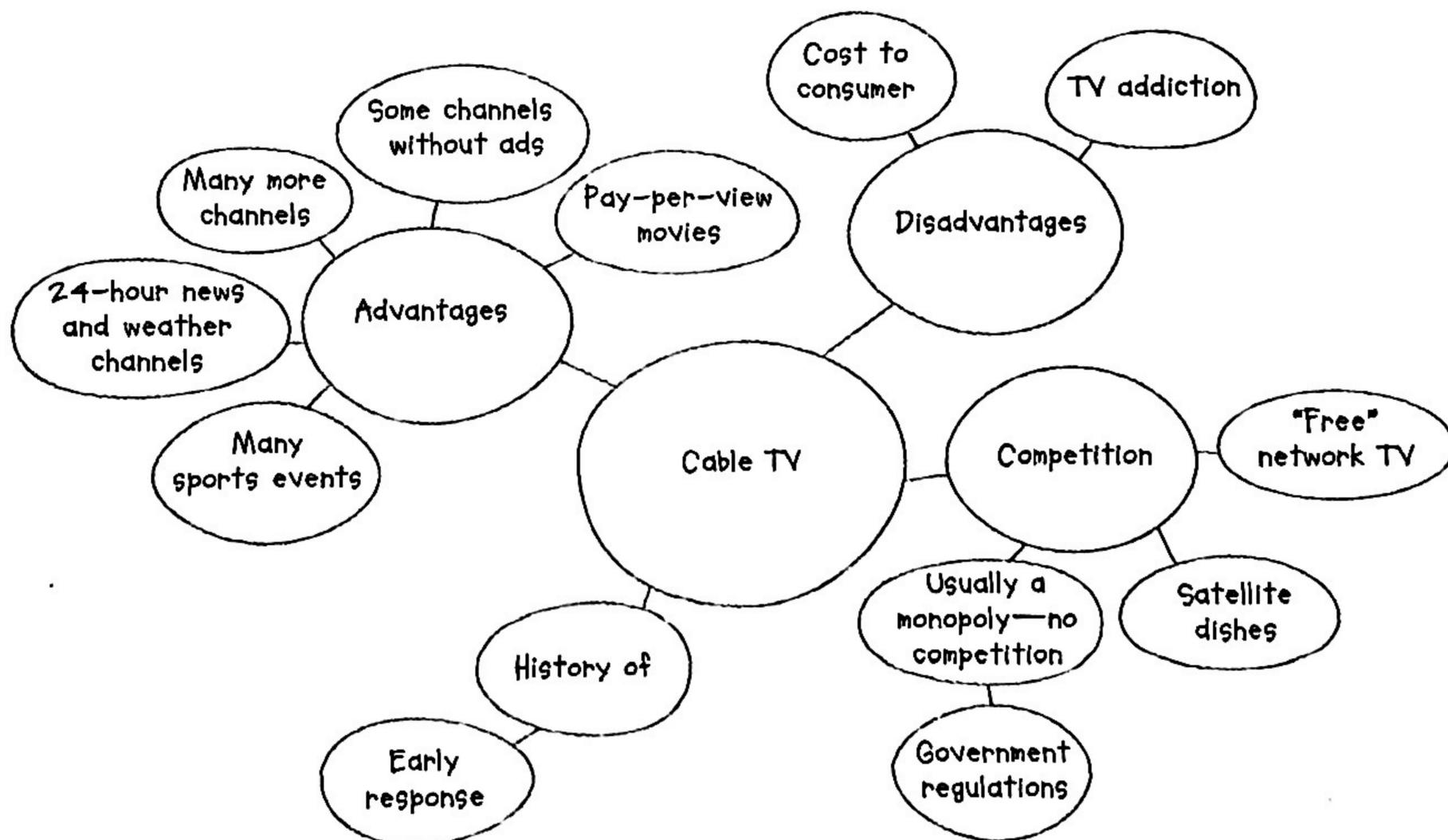
other international karate foundations

Karate Hall of Fame

karate competitions

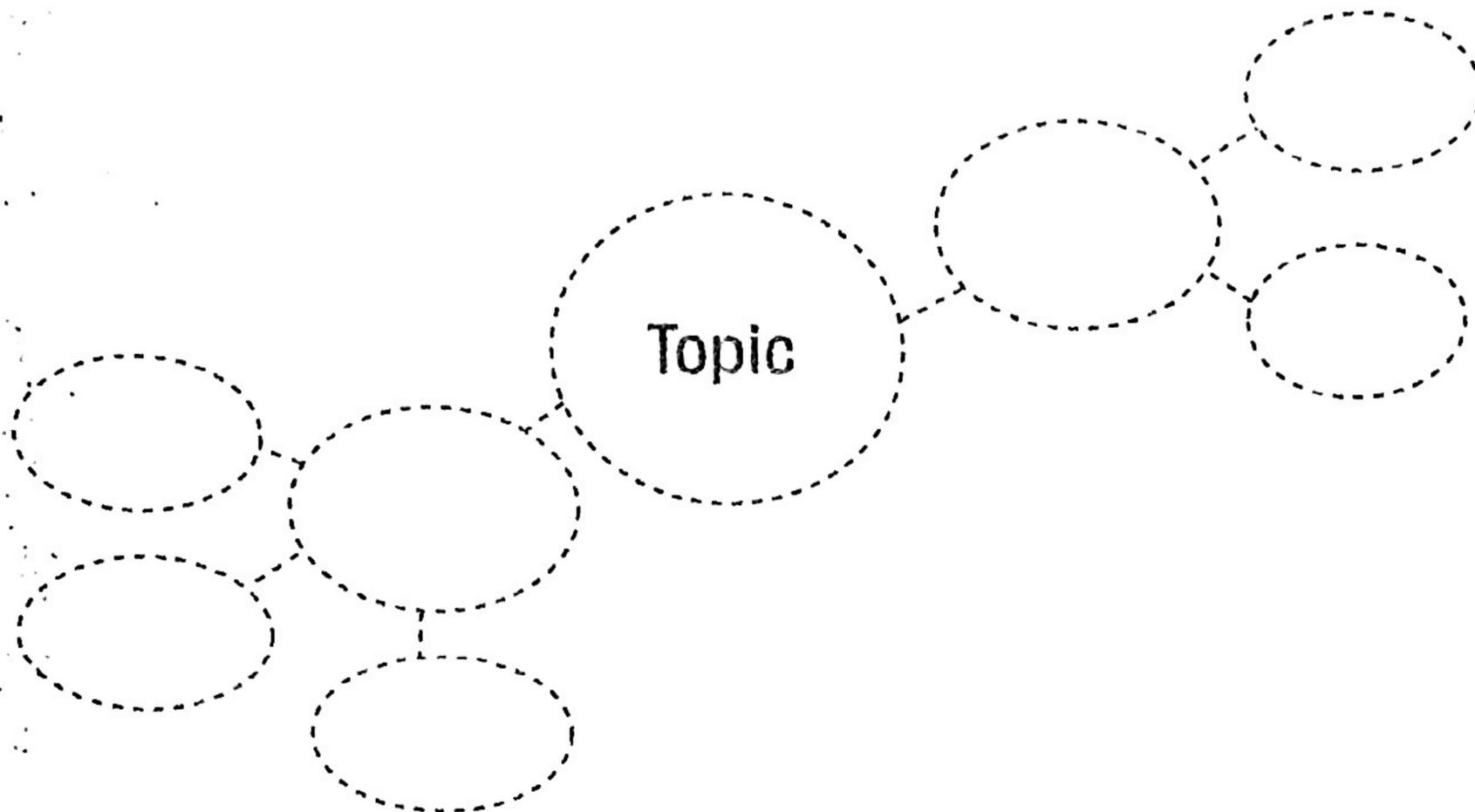
Clustering

A cluster diagram is a doodle with a purpose, a graphic device for limiting a general subject to workable topics. Start by writing the big idea—a broad, general subject—in the middle of a piece of paper, and circle it. Then break the big idea into its parts or into smaller ideas or topics you associate with it. Write each smaller idea, circle it, and draw a line connecting it to the center. Keep going, writing still more limited topics branching outward. Here is an example:

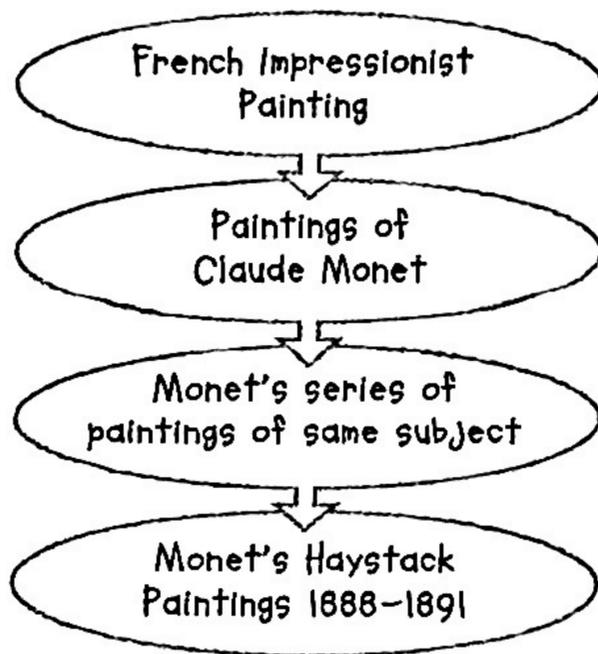


Exercise 2 Making a Cluster Diagram

In the space below, fill in a cluster diagram of one of the topics you came up with in Exercise 1. Remember, there are no right or wrong clusters. Start with the topic in the middle, and branch out from there. Keep going until you run out of ideas and/or room. Add more circles if you need them.



STRAIGHT-LINE CLUSTER. A straight-line cluster is another kind of diagram that will help you limit a broad topic. It moves from a broad, general subject (at the top) to ever more limited, narrower topics. Try it. You may find it more useful than the bigger cluster.

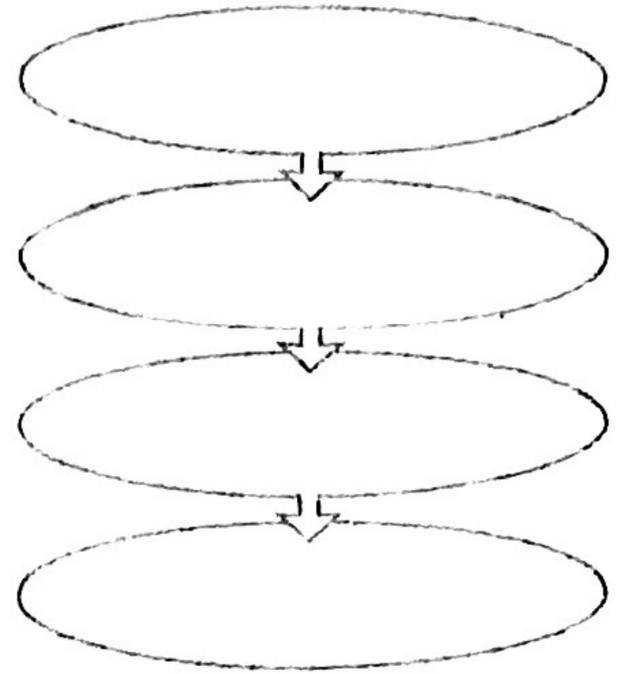


Hint!

Your cluster diagram may look entirely different from those of your classmates, even though you all might start with the same broad, general subject. There are no "right" topics in a cluster diagram. A cluster records your own thoughts as you move from a general idea to narrower topics.

Exercise 3 Limiting Your Topic

Fill in the straight-line cluster diagram here. Start with a general topic, and keep limiting it further and further. Your topic should move from the general at the top to the more and more limited as you approach the bottom. On a separate sheet of paper or your computer, make at least two more of these diagrams, starting each one with a different topic. You may add as many circles as you need until you reach a workable topic.



Research Questions

- Word your limited topic as a research question that you are going to investigate.**

Before you start exploring possible sources of information, spend a few minutes jotting down what you already know—or think you know—about your topic. This will help focus your research still further. As you take notes or freewrite, you may end up with one or more research questions—questions to which you would like to find the answers.

TAKING NOTES. Here are some notes made by a student writer for a paper on reforms in the jury system in U.S. courts. The student wrote down everything she already knew and ended by focusing on the research question she wanted to explore.

Courts use juries in trials to decide whether a person is innocent or guilty as accused. Both criminal and civil. Are there always 12 jurors?

Juries are supposed to be "jury of peers"—a mix of people who represent the population—of ages, races, gender. Are juries mentioned in U.S. Constitution?

How are people called to serve on juries, and what is the source of their names? I think maybe the lists of registered voters or in some places everyone with a driver's license.

How old do you have to be?

Who actually gets to choose jurors—the lawyers? the judge?—and how are they chosen?

Cases of innocent people being convicted and guilty people going free.

I'd like to research proposed reforms (changes) in jury system. How can I find out?

FREEWITING OR QUICKWRITING. Another way to find out what you already know is to freewrite or quickwrite for a few minutes. Keep yourself focused on your topic, and just start writing. Don't worry about complete sentences or connections between ideas. The point is simply to get what's in your brain on paper or onto your computer monitor. Freewriting may contain information as well as questions. Because you think much faster than you write, use abbreviations, fragments, or anything else to capture your thoughts as you focus on your topic.

Research key words "jury reform" through a search engine and on InfoTrac. See if I can interview Tony's mom, assistant state district attorney. I can write to natl or state Bar Assoc (organization of lawyers) & ask for info about jury reform. Maybe talk with Ben's older brother—graduated from law school last year & was editor of law review. Ask him for advice on how to research the topic—what are best sources?

USING A KWL CHART. Another way to organize your thoughts before you start doing your research is to fill in a KWL chart. In this graphic organizer, you begin by identifying your topic. Then you list what you already *know* about your topic (K), what you *want* to know (W), and what you *learned* (L). You can fill in the first two columns now and complete the third column as you do your research.

Topic: _____

What I Already Know	What I Want to Know	What I Learned

Exercise 4**Identifying Appropriately Limited Topics**

For each numbered item below, identify the topics that are neither too general nor too limited but just right for a 5- to 7-page research paper. On a separate sheet of paper, write the letter(s) of the topic(s) you picked, and explain why you did not pick the others. Some items have more than one correct answer.

1.
 - a. The population of the United States
 - b. Information from the latest U.S. census
 - c. Some problems in collecting accurate information in the latest U.S. census
 - d. The number of people of Vietnamese origin living in San Francisco

2.
 - a. Symbolism in Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and "Mending Wall"
 - b. Robert Frost's poetry
 - c. Symbolism in contemporary American poetry
 - d. The origin of the word *wall*

3.
 - a. Careers in medicine
 - b. Pros and cons of being a nurse in a hospital emergency room
 - c. The history of medicine in Europe during the twentieth century
 - d. Medical research today

4.
 - a. The career of Jackie Robinson, the first African American baseball player in the major leagues
 - b. African Americans and baseball
 - c. The history of baseball in America
 - d. The World Series

5.
 - a. U.S. presidential elections
 - b. Pros and cons of paid political advertisements
 - c. U.S. presidential candidates
 - d. Problems with various types of voting machines

6.
 - a. Harriet Tubman's accomplishments on the Underground Railroad
 - b. History of slavery in the Americas
 - c. Fugitive slave laws
 - d. *Roots* by Alex Haley—tracing the writer's origins back to Africa

7.
 - a. The history of writing
 - b. Cracking hieroglyphics—the Rosetta stone
 - c. Cuneiform and hieroglyphics—precursors of the alphabet
 - d. Sequoya's invention of an alphabet for the Cherokee language

8. a. History of and current requirements for physical education in local schools
- b. Overweight Americans
- c. Too much TV
- d. Health benefits of sports and other forms of exercise

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Exercise 5

Limiting a Broad Subject

See how many limited topics appropriate for a research paper you can list for each of the broad, general subjects below. Work with a partner on the first topic. Use a separate sheet of paper or your computer. Here is an example to get you started.

General topic. Dogs

Limited topics. Obedience training; breeds of dogs that are good with children; crime-fighting dogs; how seeing-eye dogs are trained; most dangerous dogs; White House dogs; animal shelters; rabies and other serious diseases; from wolves to dogs—their early history

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. Popular music | 6. Circuses |
| 2. Space travel | 7. Television |
| 3. Cartoons | 8. Careers in science |
| 4. World War II | 9. Community problems |
| 5. Ancient Greece | 10. Olympic Games |

Exercise 6

Freewriting About a Limited Topic

Choose one of the limited topics you are considering for your paper. On a separate sheet of paper or your computer, freewrite for several minutes about what you already know about the topic, the questions you have, and any other thoughts or associations that come to mind. Remember, when you freewrite, you don't have to write in complete sentences. Just stay focused on the limited topic, and write down—as fast as you can—all the thoughts, images, questions, and ideas that occur to you. If you are freewriting on a computer, print out what you have written, or save it and back it up.

Exercise 7

Making a KWL Chart

Choose a different limited topic, and make a KWL chart like the one shown on page 18. (You can create the chart on paper or on a computer.) Fill in the topic and the first two columns (What I Already Know, What I Want to Know). Save your chart so that you can complete the third column (What I Learned) after you've done your research.

Exercise 8**Revising Inappropriate Topics**

Tell why each topic below is inappropriate for a research paper. Then suggest two alternative but related topics for each. Keep in mind the four requirements for a workable topic. (See pages 11–12.) For example:

Inappropriate. Snowboarding (too general)

Workable. Dangers of snowboarding; comparing and contrasting water-skiing and snowboarding

1. My favorite Mexican foods

2. Space exploration in the year 2050

3. Airport security

4. Native American art

5. Grammy awards

6. Hurricanes

7. William Shakespeare's plays

8. Slang in my grandparents' day

9. Chinese Immigration to the United States

10. Solar energy

Exercise 9 Wording Your Research Questions

On a separate sheet of paper or your computer, write several research questions for the limited topic that most interests you. These should simply be questions to which you would like to find the answers.

Exercise 10 Checking Your Progress

Answer each of the following questions about the work you've done so far.

1. What is the limited topic you have chosen to write about?

2. Are you satisfied with your research questions? Which one(s) appeal to you most? Why?

3. What other topic ideas did you seriously consider? (Write your second and third choices.)

4. How or where did you get the idea for your limited topic?

5. Which approaches to finding and limiting your topic did you try?

6. Which approaches did you think were most useful? Why?

Checklist Review



Are you on schedule?
Check the Timetables on page 10.

- Make sure you understand your assignment.
- Draw up a project schedule.
- Choose a workable topic that meets all of these requirements for a research paper topic:
 - You can find enough material on the topic.
 - The topic interests you, and you think you can make it interest your audience.
 - The topic is objective, not subjective (if you are writing an informational, or factual, research paper).
 - The topic is limited enough to be covered adequately in the space available.
- Word your limited topic as a research question that you are going to investigate.