

Brainstorming: How to Choose a Topic

When you've got a paper coming up and your professor says you're free to choose your own topic, many writers suddenly go blank. Even if your professor gives you a pretty specific topic, you still have to have something to say about that topic! Where are you supposed to start? Even if you know the field you are writing for (such as psychology, nursing, literature, etc.), the complexity of subjects paired with the limitlessness of the human imagination leads to many roads you could go down with any given writing assignment. Thus, methods of brainstorming can be incredibly helpful when it comes to generating ideas and then narrowing down your topic to making sure it is appropriate for the assignment at hand.

What to Look For

First, when you are choosing a topic, you need to think about the purpose of the assignment and the expectations of your readers. These are few key elements you want to consider.

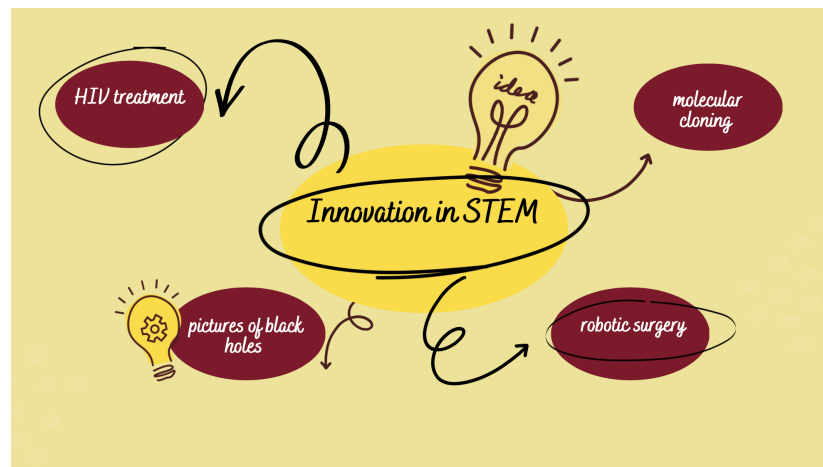
- **Practicality/Researchability**
 - For an assignment that requires the use of outside sources, such as a research paper or literature review, make sure that those sources actually exist (unless you're at a level where you are expected to conduct your own research). For example, you may not be able to find scholarly sources regarding **metaphors for the seven deadly sins in the movie *Frozen*** simply because that isn't a topic often thought of when watching Elsa sing *Let It Go*. In this case, you may want to simplify your idea. **Themes of breaking free from the emotional restraints the patriarchy imposes on women in *Frozen*** would be much a more researchable because of how these ideas are readily apparent when analyzing the movie through a feminist lens. However, if you aren't required to use sources for an assignment when the professor has asked you to write a paper identifying metaphors for the seven deadly sins in contemporary media, AND you can persuade your readers that there are metaphors for the seven deadly sins in *Frozen*, then go for it! But if you really can't provide that, you just want to write about *Frozen* because that's your favorite movie, it's time to rethink your strategy. As they say, "There has to be a there there," but original, surprising ideas do hook readers more than obvious ones.
- **Relevance/Timeliness**
 - This may go without saying, but if the assignment is about recent technological innovation, you may not want to look at the invention of the wheel (although that could be a really interesting topic!). Giving yourself a timeframe to work within can be beneficial in narrowing the scope of your research and your thesis. Remember that research in the social and hard sciences is ever evolving, so it should be relatively recent, not that you won't also work with foundational figures upon which further theory has been built.
- **Interest**
 - Try to choose a topic that interests you! This will make your research and writing much easier and much more enjoyable. However, maybe your paper is for a class that you couldn't care less about; if that's the case, try to recall some element of the course that sparked your interest, or something that made you want to ask questions and learn more. Try to look at topics from different angles, and let yourself think your thoughts even if they are kind of edgy, and you'll surprise yourself! If something isn't interesting and thought-provoking to you, a little sophisticated, it probably won't be interesting to your reader.

Types of Brainstorming

Bubble Diagrams

Bubble diagrams are a fantastic way to visualize your topic and develop a preliminary outline at the same time. By using this method, you can look at several different options at once, and then decide which one will work best for you. Grab a pen and paper, and start in the middle with four different bubbles. Inside each of these, write down an idea or subject area that interests you, that would be appropriate for the assignment. Then, expand on each of these with more bubbles,

connected by lines and/or arrows. How can you narrow each area down? If one just hits a dead end, then you know it isn't the topic you want. Once you've settled on an idea, you can roll straight into an outline by creating a new bubble diagram: your final topic in a big bubble in the middle, and then the ideas and research you're going to use connected to it.



Bullet-Point Lists

Some people work best with neat outlines that can be read clearly. If this seems like you, try using a bullet-point list to brainstorm!

- Start with a subject area you're interested in, such as "literature."
 - On the next level, get narrower. What type of literature? British romance? East Asian classics?
 - Say you've decided on British romance. *Get narrower.* British romance from when? Maybe it's the 2010s, when your favorite author was publishing her 70+ book series on royal scandals. Or maybe you're really into the Brontë sisters, in which case you'd want to look at those works. You can't really find any research on your favorite author.
 - You've decided that you want to examine the Brontë sisters, but what elements should you look for? This will be the narrowest level of your list. Qualities of their works that interest you will be what you want to look for, such as how feminism is displayed in their books, or how the ideal romance is portrayed.
 - You'll end up with a topic like this: **"Portrayals of romance across the works of the Brontë sisters."**
 - How long is your paper supposed to be? Total, the Brontës wrote 9 novels, so this might work as a 15-page paper. You may or may not have to narrow one more time.
 - a few specific novels
 - a more narrower controlling idea: portrayals of romance **as pain**

Here is another example.

- Innovations in STEM
 - Recent innovations (last 20 years)
 - Which area of STEM?
 - Tech/engineering developments in the last 20 years.
 - Here is where a bit of research would be conducted to see *what* developments have occurred.
 - molecular cloning, HIV treatments, robotic surgery, and the first-ever picture of a black hole.
 - What is most interesting to you? **Final topic: How NASA's imaging technology has developed over the last 20 years.**
 - You might need to narrow to **10 years**, or **5 years**.

