Assignment → Topic → Thesis → Paper

1. Check and recheck the assignment and determine your task and purpose
Read your assignment carefully. Then read it again and annotate or highlight the key words or phrases that describe your task: Are you being told to “summarize”? to “contrast”? to “discuss”? to “evaluate”? to “defend”? to “explain”? to “analyze”? to “argue”? Are there subparts or questions that you must address or are the ‘questions to consider’ optional?
   Not sure? Proceed to Step 2.

2. Consider asking your instructor clarifying questions
It’s better to ask than to guess wrong: “Are we allowed to include our own personal experiences and observations?” “Are we just supposed to identify relevant sources or evaluate them, too?” “Do we need to bring in outside research?”

3. Any flexibility in your topic? Be curious and follow your interests
Nothing drains the life and energy out of a project or paper—for you and for your reader—than a topic that you have no interest or emotional investment in. Sometimes your hands are completely tied. If they’re not, though, make the most of what flexibility you have by following your interests and choosing a topic you’re curious about.
   Not sure what you might want to pursue? Brainstorm your way to a topic:
   • Read or seen something lately that’s relevant to the assignment? Maybe a news item? A current controversy in the field? What is something you’d like to know more about that fits within the instructor’s guidelines?
   • Consider topics that matter to you. Maybe something related to your career path, activities, friends, or family? The idea is not that you’ll write about the child you tutored who had ADHD, but that your experience with and concern for her will motivate you to explore ADHD deeply.
   • Don’t forget issues or ideas from other courses. Perhaps you can get a running start from an intriguing subject in another class.
   • Browse the internet or library databases relating to your general subject. A search that starts with “developmental psychology” will take you to headings, sub-headings, and sub-sub-headings that may spark your curiosity.
   • Consult the pros. Contact your instructor for suggestions. Talk to a reference librarian about ‘routes in.’ Who else do you know who knows more than you do about your general subject?

4. Zero in and narrow your topic to a tighter focus
Try some different strategies to narrow the focus from your broad general topic to something you can put your hands around, to ascertain your purpose, and define your audience:
   • Reporters’ questions: Consider the who, what, when, where, how, and why’s relating to your topic.
   • “Bug” list: What really bugs you about the subject?
   • Devil’s Advocate, Off-the-Wall, Against the Grain: Challenge the conventional thinking. What is a ‘road less traveled’ concerning your topic?
   • Alternate viewpoints: Who affects and is affected by this? Identify the different ‘players’ or ‘stakeholders’ involved to gain a slant and focus on your subject.

Writing at BATES
5. Use that focus to guide your reading and to shape a tentative thesis
After you’ve read and researched with your focus in mind, review your notes, then step back. Try completing one of these starters:

• What I really want to say is…
• The most compelling aspect of my topic is…
• The key question a reader would have about my topic is…
• What I’ve learned that is most surprising about my topic is…

Without looking at your notes, can you crisply state in a couple of sentences the point you want to make? Alternatively, can you ask the focused question you want your paper to answer? If so, tweak the resulting answer into a statement or claim that can serve as the main idea of your paper.

Close in on a tentative thesis by asking—and answering—the dreaded “So what?” question about your rough idea. Take five minutes to try freewriting one-sentence and two-sentence responses to the “So what?” question about your thesis idea. Why do your issue and your slant on it matter?

A helpful definition of a thesis is that it is a definite claim about a specific idea. Each part of the definition offers useful reminders:

• “definite” = not weasel-y, exploratory, vague, or fuzzy;
• a “claim” = takes a position, is debatable, and requires support or further development;
• “specific” = not broad or general but focused and zeroed in; and
• “idea” = not a fact, mere opinion, or description, but an insight

6. Go forward! (But keep coming back, too…)
Use that tentative thesis to guide you as you draft your paper, but remember also to

• Clarify and revise your tentative thesis if you find it no longer matches what you want to say or what have subsequently learned; and

• Read through your draft for the key sentences that seem to state your idea. (Often they’re in the conclusion.) Do your key sentences “match up” with your thesis? Tweak the thesis so that it fits what you’ve actually argued.

Sources