

# NARROWING YOUR TOPIC OR THE CHICKEN AND THE EGG

Online: [www.ufv.ca/writing\\_centre](http://www.ufv.ca/writing_centre)

## Habits of academic writers

Before you begin to do research, you will want to have an idea of not just a broad topic, but a narrower topic within it. What academic writers do is investigate a very specific topic through a particular lens. The lens is based on their discipline, and their specific interests within it. So, many topics could be looked at through lenses of, for example, psychology, history, biology, math. And within disciplines, there are fields and areas of interest. So, for academic researchers and writers, it is much better to look at specific aspects of a topic in a lot of detail rather than general aspects of a topic in less detail. Your first goal is to narrow your topic enough that you can choose a few key words to begin your research.

## Why the chicken and the egg?

Not everyone knows the chicken or the egg question: “which came first, the chicken or the egg?” It is generally used to refer to complex questions that do not have answers. The question has no answer. Similarly, “which comes first, the topic or the research?” doesn’t really have an answer either. Narrowing a topic is a very complex activity, and it is difficult to know which comes first, the topic or the research. In other words, you must narrow your topic *before* you begin researching, but your topic will be narrowed more and more *as* you do research.

## Tips and a practice example:

1) *Brainstorm as many subtopics within the main topic as you can.* (use your experiences in the world to brainstorm—sometimes, though, you have to do some research even to discover what kinds of things are being discussed within your general topic)

Pretend general topic: Global Warming

-many different causes (car emissions, industrial emissions, harmful chemicals in landfills)

-many different effects (drastic changes in weather patterns, melting ice caps, flooding, hurricanes, droughts, all of which cause human death, destruction of infrastructure—roads, buildings, etc.)

-how can we change? (government policies (local, provincial, national, international), what individuals can do (take transit, recycle, carpool, drive hybrid cars, reduce use of resources like hydro electricity and water)

-education (how we can teach people in schools, in communities)

2) *Choose which ones interest you most* (be as specific as you can).

- a) So, I could choose to research effects of car emissions on weather patterns in Canada.
- b) I could choose to research UN policies for countries to reduce their industries' pollution.
- c) I could choose to research education programs for grade school children in one of China's provinces.
- d) I could choose to research ways Vancouver's transit system does or does not help people to reduce emissions from vehicles.

The possibilities are endless—it's up to you to choose which specific parts of a topic are most interesting for you.

3) *Identify key words from your more precise sub-topics.* (Include the broad topic as well as key words from your more specific sub-topics)

- a) Global warming, effects of car emissions, weather patterns, Canada
- b) Global warming, UN policies, industrial emissions
- c) Global warming, educational programs for children, China
- d) Global warming, transit systems, vehicle emissions, Vancouver

4) *Where you search is important!* (The librarians are very helpful with these aspects of your research.)

Your key words also help you to choose disciplines and databases to search. For example, if I choose to examine example (a) above, I would start by choosing a database that focused on environmental science (because of "effects" and "weather patterns"). I am looking through an "environment" lens, not through a lens of science like, say, chemistry. Also, I could research "effects of car emissions" (in example a) by looking at chemistry databases because what emissions are made of is probably important.

5) *Further narrowing*

As you do research, you will most likely discover that there are no sources that exactly match your key words. This is because your contribution is original; no one will discuss the same topic in the same way. So, try to choose sources that address some of your key words rather than all of them. Different sources will likely be useful for different parts of your paper, for different sub-topics within the main one. You will likely be able to identify some sources as central and others as less central, but important for more specific details. This is how you narrow your topic even further as you decide which key words and which sources are most important for your own paper. You will probably find that you like one or two sources best. This is good! Use those sources to narrow key words further. Identify what key terms the source is using and use those to search further.

Remember: Narrowing your topic is complex and does not happen in precise steps but throughout the process of doing research, of outlining, and of drafting and revising your research paper.

6) *Writing Centre consultant does some research*

So, I'm picking (d)--(global warming, transit system, vehicle emissions, Vancouver). I have to decide first what the lens could be by thinking about the key words. Academic databases are organized by discipline, not by topic, precisely because of the lens. So, I have to pick a database. Hmm. I click "Articles in Journals A-Z." Right.

Wow, there's a lot of stuff here. I return to the key words: "global warming, emissions, transit system, Vancouver." Ok, I'm going to go for "global warming" and "emissions" before "transit system" and "Vancouver." Right. What I want is science. I look at the many descriptions of what might look like science to me, and settle on "General Science full text" because the description is broad—there are articles from many lenses and I don't know which ones I want to use yet. So I punch in "global warming", "emissions," and, why not, "transit system." Not surprisingly, none of the articles seem to talk about all of these. I know this because I read the abstracts (short summaries) and keywords listed.

Not many of the articles talk about what I want to look at. I don't really know what that is yet, but I know what it isn't somehow. Aha! I spot an article that explains how emissions are harmful. That matches "effects!" This article is talking about "carbon dioxide emissions." Cool. Maybe I want to use a chemistry lens too. So I punch in "carbon dioxide emissions" and.....now it is time for you to experience this yourself. Best of luck to you—it's a jungle out there. But a very exciting and interesting one.



***The Writing Centre at the University of the Fraser Valley***

- *promotes and researches writing as a foundational activity connected to critical thinking and learning in a post-secondary setting,*
- *provides a confidential service offering writing instruction to students who wish to become effective writers in their fields of study, and*
- *engages in dialogue with UFV's community of learners about the teaching of writing in discipline areas.*

*The Writing Centre*