



# TIP SHEET: CHOOSING A TOPIC



Have you ever stared at a blank page or screen, struggling to start an essay? Have you ever had too many ideas and struggled to organize them into a structured piece of writing? If the answer is yes to either question, you may be missing some important stages of the writing process: planning, generating ideas, and deciding on a focus.

## **PLANNING**

Each assignment has its own expectations and taking some time to understand the task can save a lot of confusion later on. Ask yourself:

- What is the task? How many words, what subject?
- What is the assignment asking you to do? Look for key words like *describe*, *analyse*, or *critique*.
- Who is the audience?

Make sure you understand any specialist vocabulary in the assignment. If you are still not clear, talk to your instructor.

## **GENERATING IDEAS**

You may have chosen or been given a subject for your essay. A subject is a broad area of discussion, for example 'Canadian wildlife' or '19th Century art'. It will be impossible to write about such a broad subject in a three-page essay, so your first job will be to select a small section of the subject to be your focus. This will be your essay topic.

Taking some time to think freely and let ideas flow can help you to choose a topic that's rich and interesting. Here are some examples of methods for generating ideas:

- **Free writing** – write for five minutes about your broad subject. Write anything that comes into your mind without editing yourself and without worrying about spelling or punctuation. Then read to see if there is any possible topic material
- **Questioning** - divide a piece of paper into two columns. In the left column, write as many questions as you can about the topic. Use questions words like *Who? What? Where? When? How? and Why?* In the right column write answers to the questions.
- **Mind mapping** – if you think in a visual way, this may be an effective approach. Write your subject in a bubble in the centre of a page and add any words or ideas associated in separate bubbles. Use arrows to show connections between ideas.

## DECIDE ON A FOCUS

Once you have generated ideas, you can choose the focus of your essay. What should you consider when choosing your topic?

- The topic should be suitable to the assignment and your course. If you're not sure, then talk to your instructor.
- It shouldn't be too narrow or too broad, but should define an issue that can be dealt with effectively within the length of the paper. If the focus is too wide, your essay will not be able to go into much detail. If the focus is too narrow, you may struggle to find enough content to write the essay.
- It should be significant. If your readers don't care about your topic, they won't be engaged or motivated to read your essay.

## FINALLY...

If you need more information about essay writing, or answers to questions about specific assignments, you can:

- Check out the JIBC Library website at [www.jibc.ca/library](http://www.jibc.ca/library)
- Contact JIBC Peer Writing Support  
Email [writingsupport@jibc.ca](mailto:writingsupport@jibc.ca) to make an appointment
- Grab additional tip sheets from the Writing Centre, located at the New Westminster Campus in room CL201

To learn more, go to [JIBC.CA/studentssupports](http://JIBC.CA/studentssupports)



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