

Choosing a Topic

You decide to bake cookies. You go online to look up recipes. The number of results is overwhelming.

You have to decide what kind of cookies you want- Peanut butter? Sugar cookies? Oatmeal chocolate chip? The flavour options are endless- and don't get me started about topping. Sprinkles? Chocolate chips? Icing that turns your cookie into a Star Wars character? Icing that turns your cookie into Pacman? Cookie sandwiches? More chocolate chips?

Choosing a cookie recipe can be kind of like choosing a topic for your research paper.

Sure, there are a lot of options, but what toppings- I mean topics- are you really interested in? What ideas make you hungry to know more? What questions leave you *craving* answers?

Choosing a topic for your paper is going to require some brainstorming before you dive into any serious research.

If your course instructor hasn't already provided the research question to base your essay on then now is the time to think of a topic that relates to your course and interests you.

After you've done this it's time to brainstorm ideas related to the topic. Perhaps create a concept map, or list of ideas.

Along the way feel free to discuss your ideas with your professor, TA, or peers as a way to develop your topic.

Now it's time to do some background reading. Consider using encyclopedias and reference books from the library. These will give you a brief overview of your topic.

It's also a good idea to keep notes of the information you find interesting.

Now it's time to narrow down your topic to one specific research question. Based on your notes from background reading consider the following questions:

What aspects of this topic spark your interests?

Is there a point of view that you're curious about?

A specific period in history, geographic location, or particular population?

Think about different cultures, age, and gender.

Next, turn your topic into a research question. If stuck, refer to the 5 W's: Who, What, When, Where and Why?

The key here is to give yourself enough time to go through this thought process. If you don't you might end up with one of those horrible batches of cookies that are hard as rock, instead of the delicious chewy variety that you've been craving.