

RESEARCH ① 2 3

Developing Your Topic

1. Choosing a Topic

Choose any topic in the universe.	"something about organic matter"
Be a little more specific.	"compost and soil"
Be a lot more specific.	"soil nutrients released by organic matter decomposition"

REPEAT several times to give yourself a few possible topics to choose from.

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When you have a few examples, choose a topic that meets your assignment requirements and is something you want to write about. You may think it's ready to go, but for most academic writing you're going to need to narrow it down more.

2. Narrowing Your Topic to a Research Question

Make one or two words more specific.	"soil nutrients released by forest litter decomposition"
Turn the topic into a complete sentence.	"The effect of soil nutrients on forest litter decomposition is a factor in evaluating organic matter changes."
Turn the sentence into a question that is precise, arguable, and could be researched.	"How does understanding the factors controlling forest litter decomposition clarify the relationship between soil nutrients and litter decomposition? Does that help to understand forest succession, forest water conservation and soil re-production capacity?"

Make one or two words more specific.	
Turn the topic into a complete sentence.	
Turn the sentence into a question that is precise, arguable, and could be researched.	

Adapted from "Choosing and Narrowing a Topic to Write About (for Research Papers)" by Neil Cunningham
<http://www.sophia.org/tutorials/choosing-and-narrowing-a-topic-to-write-about-for>

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Research Preparation

1. Using your precise and arguable question as a starting point, list keywords that frame the topic.		2. List as many synonyms as possible for your keywords.	
Keywords		Synonyms	
forest litter		humus, duff	
decomposition		decay, rot, deterioration	
soil nutrients		nourishment	
forest succession		cycle	
soil microorganisms		bacteria, microbe	
water conservation		control, protection	
ecosystem		atmosphere	
biotic, abiotic		biological	
ecology		environment	
mineralization		oxidation	

3. Create combinations or phrases that describe your topic using 3 or more keywords and synonyms for each.

humus + decomposition + ecosystem
 forest succession + water conservation + soil bacteria
 soil nutrients + mineralization + forest litter

_____ + _____ + _____

_____ + _____ + _____

_____ + _____ + _____

_____ + _____ + _____

Use these keyword combinations as search terms when you begin your research.

4. Other considerations (check as many as apply):

- I need up to date information (within the last 5-10 years; within the last 2-3 years; less than 1 year old)
- I need highly scholarly information (from books by scholars; from peer-reviewed sources)
- I need immediate access to information (My paper is due soon!)
- I need primary sources (images; newspapers; data; other _____)

Now you have the components you need for successful searching in *Research 2!*