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Teach's Tips for Tearless Research Papers

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Laurie Michel

How to Select a Research Paper Topic

After you understand the requirements for the research paper, you need to select your topic. Most students actually waste a great deal of time doing this because they're really not that enthused about writing the paper. You need to decide quickly what you will do so you can get started and finish in a timely fashion. The first sensible question to ask is if you can find something which meets the course requirements with which you are already familiar. You may think having three months to work on the paper is a long time. You are wrong. All manner of things will intervene and when there are three *weeks* left, many a student has done virtually nothing and makes himself miserable cramming to whip out something--anything--to turn in. Trust me, it shows in the final product and most likely will show in your grade though you probably shorted yourself on sleep, time with family and friends, and needed study time in other courses.

If you can do the paper on something you have some knowledge of, you will speed up the process. You should be able to come up with a thesis statement, your three main areas of focus, and know some good places to look for information, the big concepts in the field, and perhaps the names of some folks whose work you will want to include. This is hours of time saved. Now if you don't have that advantage, or what you know is something you can't stand the idea of learning more about, then you need to quickly locate another topic you can live with for the duration of the paper development. Most likely your instructor will provide some guidance on this subject. However, you can also turn to some Web sites to generate possible topics.

Remember, you *start* with a *question* for your research paper and your thesis statement becomes your answer to the question. So your original question might be: "How could we improve the U.S. federal income tax system?" Your answer, or thesis statement, might be: "The U.S. should switch to the Forbes flat tax." A really good thesis statement will include some reasons why: "The U.S. should switch to the Forbes flat tax because it will save us money, increase revenues, and encourage investment." Please note that being quite specific, such as selecting the Forbes flat tax from the several proposals out there, can make for a much stronger paper because you will be able to deal with specifics (What is taxed; what's the standard deduction; what's the tax rate,; and how could the tax rate be altered? Those are details that vary by proposal.) First, however, you need the topic.

Web sites devoted to topic ideas

You can locate such Web sites by entering "research paper ideas" into a search engine. You will find a wealth of them. Some that may be of interest to you include:

Best Information on the Net

<http://library.sau.edu/bestinfo/Hot/hotindex.htm>. Click on the topic area and find links.

Public Agenda Topics

<http://www.publicagenda.org/>. Click to find many links.

Science in the Headlines

<http://www.nationalacademies.org/headlines/>. Links with reports on science issues in the news.

Contra Costa College

<http://www.contracosta.cc.ca.us/library/guides/topics.htm>. Provides subject headings and sample database searches. This is a good example of how to find additional information by using subject headings.

The CQ Researcher

Your college may have this available as an online service. If not, the library surely has the paper version. Each issue of the *Congressional Quarterly Researcher* will deal with one controversial issue and have a wealth of information to use. It's printed weekly.

Books

There are also books written that provide thousands of research paper topic ideas. Most likely your library has one or more of these in the Reference section so that it won't be checked out and you can browse it.

If you're still not sure

If you haven't decided on a topic in a day or two, then choose three that seem to have some promise and read something, perhaps an encyclopedia article that provides a general overview. See if something becomes more interesting. If not, see if your instructor, a Writing Center tutor, classmate, friend, or librarian can give you a good idea. You absolutely need to select a topic in one week or less because time is wasting. If worse comes to worse, jot down your top three ideas on slips of paper and just pull one out and work with it. To be blunt, for most students, the indecisiveness is about not wanting to do the work required. That is not a good reason to delay the research process. Few students start with enthusiasm, but if you procrastinate you won't have enthusiasm for the paper at any point.

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