

## Narrowing a Topic From Subject To Thesis

Usually your instructor will assign a broad subject for a term paper or essay. Within this broad subject, you need to define a specific topic. Obviously, the narrowness or breadth of this topic will depend on the length of the essay or paper you are expected to write. As Professor Fred Crews points out in the Random House Handbook, one way to define a topic is to pose a question about the general subject.

Be aware, however, that not any question will do. For the purpose of writing an academic paper, questions headed by How or Why are preferable to yes-no questions or questions headed by Who, What, Where, or When. The logic here is that How and Why questions are more likely to lead you to an integrated and coherent answer; the other questions are more likely to prompt you to merely recite a list of discrete items. In drafting your thesis, you may find it helpful to construct a phrase that includes the word because. Whether or not this because phrase appears in your final thesis, writing such a phrase will encourage you to summarize your reasoning while you are working on your essay.

Your answer to your topic question will provide the thesis statement for your essay. The following examples demonstrate sample thesis statements for papers in several disciplines:

**Subject:** Discrimination against Japanese Americans during World War II

**Topic Question:** Why did government officials allow discrimination against Japanese Americans?

**Thesis:** Government officials allowed discrimination against Japanese Americans not because it was in the nation's best interest, but because it provided a concrete enemy for people to focus on.

**Subject:** The uses of horror in the short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe.

**Topic Question:** How do Hawthorne and Poe achieve similar Gothic effects in spite of using radically different subjects?

**Thesis:** Although their subjects are different, Hawthorne and Poe achieve similar Gothic effects by delving into the psyches of their characters rather than relying on cheap horror tricks.

**Subject:** The role of mitochondria in adult obesity

**Topic Question:** How do mitochondria control the body's weight loss?

**Thesis:** Because mitochondria accelerate the rate at which cells metabolize fats, stimulating the body's mitochondria could be the key to accelerating weight loss in obese individuals.

**Subject:** Faith and fear in the Bible and the Qu'ran

**Topic Question:** How are faith and fear used to teach religious concepts?

**Thesis:** The Bible and the Qu'ran use both faith in and fear of God to encourage followers to comply with key religious teachings because this dual approach is more effective.