

# How to Narrow Your Topic

So you're preparing to writing a paper and you've decided to do it on, say, the civil rights movement. Ding ding ding! (warning bells).

A general topic leads to generalizations, and that is the kiss of death. In the academic world, specificity is king. (I mean, think about it: raise your hand if you have a prof who is a leading expert on something you've never heard of? Everyone? I rest my case. You must be specific.)

And besides the danger zone of writing in generalizations, a general topic can be difficult because it's hard to choose relevant research sources, make a clear argument backed by evidence, etc.

## So, how do you take your general idea and narrow it to make a good, tight paper topic?

Here are some ideas:

- limit it to a specific time period (example) e.g. not just American quilt making, but American quilt making in the 18th century
- limit it to a specific location or region e.g. not just the history of slavery, but the history of slavery in Atlanta
- limit it to a specific person or group e.g. not just the civil rights movement, but the role of the NAACP in the 1960s
- limit it to a specific discipline/angle/aspect (historical, sociological, psychological, policy impact, etc) e.g. not just the New Deal, but the impact of Roosevelt's New Deal on federal housing policy of the 1940s
- limit it to a particular genre, or even particular piece of work e.g. not just Adolf Hitler, but Adolf Hitler's ideas as expressed in Mein Kampf
- ask why the topic is important, particularly to the class's field of study e.g. not just impressionism, but why should we consider impressionism an important artistic movement?
- limit it to a particular controversy e.g. not just English-American relations in the 18th century, but their dispute about just taxation in the 18th century