

Tips For Students

Getting Started on an Assignment

A good paper starts before it is written. It is best to avoid procrastination and begin early. This gives you time to accumulate materials, organize your thoughts, and then draft and polish your paper. This preparatory work will always shine through in your paper, so plan an agenda and stick to it.

If the selection of a topic for your assignment is up to you, it is generally best to run a proposal by the marker of your paper (seminar leader or course instructor) AFTER you have established that there are sufficient resources in the library, but BEFORE you have devoted a great deal of work to the topic.

Instructors often include an essay proposal or research proposal as part of the actual assignment or allot time during seminars for its discussion. Rather than simply producing something off the top of your head for the sake of having it done, put some thought into your proposal, as this can help you get on track before you begin your writing and can only enhance the overall outcome of your paper.

Here are some issues to think about and questions you might ask yourself when considering topic selection (Meyer, 1982: 6-7):

Examine Yourself: What interests you? What do you care about? What have you thought about lately that you would be interested in learning more about? What are your career goals? If you reflect on who you are and what concerns you, you can draw upon yourself as a resource for topics.

Think About Current Events: Pay attention to the news. Skim newspapers or periodicals, watch television, or listen to the radio with a critical outlook. What issues, movements, experiences, beliefs, opinions or events lend themselves to further investigation?

Think About Your Work in Other Courses: This certainly does not imply submitting the same paper written in another course. (That can get you into trouble for plagiarism: See the *Brock Calendar on Academic Conduct*, and the *Section on plagiarism in this handbook*.) Rather, use the insights and interests generated by the other courses you are taking, or previous assignments you have completed, as a basis for further study. Doing this may serve to enhance your knowledge in your area of concentration or provide you with the background you need to do well in another class. Once you decide on a topic, you must consider three things:

Is this topic a suitable one to demonstrate your grasp of the course material?

Sometimes we receive well-written and thoroughly researched papers that nevertheless give no indication that the student ever attended the course or read the course material. The marker's first instinct is to suspect that the paper has been "borrowed," or bought, or written for another course all of which will bring trouble on the student.

Sometimes a student shows enthusiasm for a topic, but with lack of thought about how, or if, that topic can be discussed within the framework of the course material or from a sociological perspective. List the ways your topic relates to the theories, research problems and/or policy concerns raised in the course. If you cannot produce a substantial list, consider another topic. If it lacks relevance to the course, even a skillfully presented research essay will not receive a good mark.

Examine the relevance of your topic to Canada: Regardless of your choice, ask yourself if your course instructor is interested in topics significant to the Canadian situation. If you are not sure, find out. If this is the case, and most of the research and writing on the topic comes from the United States or other countries, be prepared to discuss their applicability, or lack of it, to the Canadian situation.

Can your research materials be accumulated within the time limits set by the instructor? Exact topics will enhance this process since valuable research time is wasted trying to cover a vast subject area.

Example:

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Topic: | The Welfare State |
| Limiting the topic: | The Canadian Welfare State |
| Better Limitation: | A Marxist critique of the Canadian Welfare State |

In this example, you have the Welfare State (Canadian case) as a basic topic, and you can begin your library research. As you uncover information about the Canadian Welfare State, think about applying a Marxist or some other theoretical analysis to it.