

## 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 paper you are expected to write. One way to define a topic is to pose questions about the subject until you have found an avenue worth exploring.

The questions you ask while thinking about your topic can be divided into three categories: literal, inferential, and critical. Although it will be useful to ask yourself all three types while researching your topic, be aware that critical questions are the ones that will bring you closest to developing your thesis.

**Literal Questions:** These are verifiable and objective—the kinds of questions you might find answers to in an encyclopedia. They often begin with “Who,” “What,” “Where,” “When,” or “How many.” Some examples:

- Q:** Who designed the LOVE sculpture? **A:** Robert Indiana
- Q:** When was the LOVE sculpture designed? **A:** On paper in 1965, as a sculpture in 1970
- Q:** What did the artist say his intentions were? **A:** Direct quotations from the artist about his creative process can be found in interviews

While you should include the answers to these questions in your paper in order to give your reader essential background information, the answer to a literal question cannot be the basis for a paper unless you are trying to discover facts not yet known to the public, such as in investigative journalism, a scientific experiment, or digging into the historical archive to uncover something that has been forgotten or overlooked. For example:

- Q:** Who was the first person to contract HIV? **A:** ??
- Q:** Where is the nearest planet with intelligent life? **A:** ??
- Q:** What is Banky’s real identity? **A:** ??
- Q:** Who were the first Muslims to arrive in North America? **A:** ??

**Inferential Questions:** These questions often deal with explanations and cause and effect. While they may not be 100% verifiable or objective, there is often some consensus about the answer. They often begin with “Why” or “How.” Asking inferential questions often helps you to understand the controversy that surrounds a subject or to make sense of what people commonly believe about it. Some examples:

- Q:** Why don’t more police departments have vest cameras? **A:** You can find statements from police departments about budget restrictions, privacy concerns, etc.
- Q:** Why did Edward Snowden release the NSA documents? **A:** You can find interviews and writings where he has discussed his rationale
- Q:** Why does Malcolm Gladwell believe the Broken Windows Theory? **A:** He has provided evidence in his writings and an explanation for why he believes that evidence is valid

Like literal questions, answers to inferential questions are important to include in your draft, but they cannot be the basis for a paper unless you are solving a genuine mystery.

**Critical Questions:** These questions point to larger ideas and theories about the importance of an issue. They are subjective, and although they can be supported with evidence and argumentation, they may not be 100% verifiable. These questions might begin with “Why does it matter,” “What is significant about,” or “What might happen if.” For example:

- Q:** What does the controversy surrounding graffiti tell us about the difference between “high” and “low” culture and between “fine” and “popular” art?
- Q:** What long-term effects might the rise of mobile phone sexting have on teenage development and on the future of American society, and should anything therefore be done about this issue?
- Q:** Should a city invest public money in building memorials to historical people and events? Why?

Once your critical question has been fine-tuned into something that is manageable and supportable with evidence and argumentation, the answer to that question can be your thesis statement!

### **One Example of Asking Questions to Narrow a Topic Down to a Thesis**

**Topic:** Irish Immigration to Boston

**Literal Questions:** How many Irish immigrants moved to Boston in 1847, and what portion of the population was that? **A:** 37,000, which was roughly one third of the total population, according to historical census reports

**Inferential Question:** Why did so many immigrant leave Ireland in 1847? **A:** The main push factor was the Great Famine of 1845, which was caused by the potato blight that destroyed the main sustenance crop of Ireland, leading to mass starvation; however, individual immigrants may have had additional or other reasons for leaving

**Inferential Question:** Why did so many Irish immigrants move to Boston? **A:** Because American agriculture was not directly affected by the blight and because Boston was one of the nearest major seaports to Ireland that accepted incoming immigrants; however, some immigrants may have had personal reasons, such as relatives in Boston

**Inferential Question:** Why did so many Irish immigrants to Boston become police officers? **A:** The consensus is that the police force appealed to Irish immigrants because it was a well-paying job that required neither citizenship status nor technical skill

**Broad Critical Question:** How has the influx of Irish immigrants to Boston in 1847 affected the city to this day? **A:** Many effects, including anti-Irish nativism, increased Catholicism, a large number of Irish police officers, and the famous Boston St. Patrick’s Day Parade

**A More Focused Critical Question:** What effect does it have on the culture of Boston that a large number of its police officers are Irish Americans? **A:** The thesis statement!

**Thesis Statement:** Boston’s long history of Irish Americans and Irish immigrants serving in the police force, coupled with the historical roots of nationalist anti-Irish racism, has resulted in a culture that privileges and enforces a minority blue-collar, Catholic worldview.