In Context Toolbox – How to Choose a Topic

The In Context Toolbox tip sheets are designed to help middle school and high school researchers prepare a written report. This document will explain how to choose a topic for your report.

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So, you have to write a report, but you don't have a topic yet. Don't worry, it's easy to pick an interesting topic. You just have to do two things:

- Consider the assignment
- Find a topic that fits

Consider the Assignment
When teachers assign reports, they often say something like:

"Write a report on ________"

What goes in the blank? Sometimes it's just a general subject area, such as science or history. Other times it's a general topic, such as a river animal or a president. And sometimes it's a specific topic, such as American Alligator or George Washington.

Think about your assignment. Is it general, specific or somewhere in between? Use the picture below to help you decide.

Where does your assignment fit?

Find a Topic That Fits
Your goal is to pick a specific topic for your report. One like the words on the right end in the picture above. Here's a way to do this. Start with your subject area.

Step One: Choose Your Subject Area
Once you know the subject area for your report, think of a subject that fits. For example, say your teacher tells you to write a science report. Think of a subject in science that interests you. Let's say you like ecology. Great! Choose ecology as your subject.
Step Two: Choose Your Subject
Once you know the subject, pick a topic area in that subject. For example, let's say you've decided to write a report about ecology. Think of a topic area in ecology that appeals to you. Maybe you are interested in endangered species. You can use endangered species as your topic area.

Step Three: Choose Your Topic Area
Once you know the topic area of your report, pick a specific topic that fits. For example, let's say you've decided to write a report about endangered species. Choose a specific topic in endangered species that interests you. You might pick jaguars, the California condor, or wildlife habitat improvement.

Step Four: Research Your Specific Topic
Congratulations! Now you have a topic for your report. But, before you decide for sure that you want to write about this topic, you might want to do a little research on it. Look for materials about your topic. Read some of the materials you find. Make sure the topic is interesting to you. If it isn't, you might want to start over and pick a different topic.

A SHORTCUT!
All of the In Context databases have a Browse Topics or Browse Issues button in their banner. You can choose a subject area and get a list of popular topics. This is a great way to jump start choosing a topic as you can click on a topic and find out a little more to see if it interests you.

Questions to Ask Yourself
Sometimes it's hard to pick a report topic. If you get stuck, here's a list of questions you might ask yourself to help you pick a topic:

- What have we been studying in class this year?
- Which subjects appeal to me?
- What are we currently studying in class?
- What are other people writing about?
- What's most interesting to me?
- Can I find materials about that?

Need more help? Ask your librarian!