

HOW
TO
WRITE
TERM
PAPERS
AND
REPORTS

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Introduction: Eight Keys to a First-Rate Paper

Your paper is due next month, next week, in three days. You need to find a topic, research it, and write the paper. How do you meet your deadline and still do a first-rate job?

This book is designed to help you at every step of the research and writing process. Whether you need help with a specific problem or with the process in general, by learning the eight keys to a first-rate paper, you can create a term paper or report that reflects your best abilities. Once you master these keys, you can apply them to any paper assigned in any course throughout your academic career.

First Key: Select and Focus Your Topic

What type of paper do you need to write—argumentative, descriptive, position, or literary? How do you choose an appropriate topic and make sure it's not too broad or too narrow? The decisions you make at this step affect your entire research and writing process. Students often need the most help at this first stage.

Chapter 1 provides essential guidelines on how to choose the best topic to fit your assignment, how to focus the topic, and how to make sure enough information is available to complete a research paper.

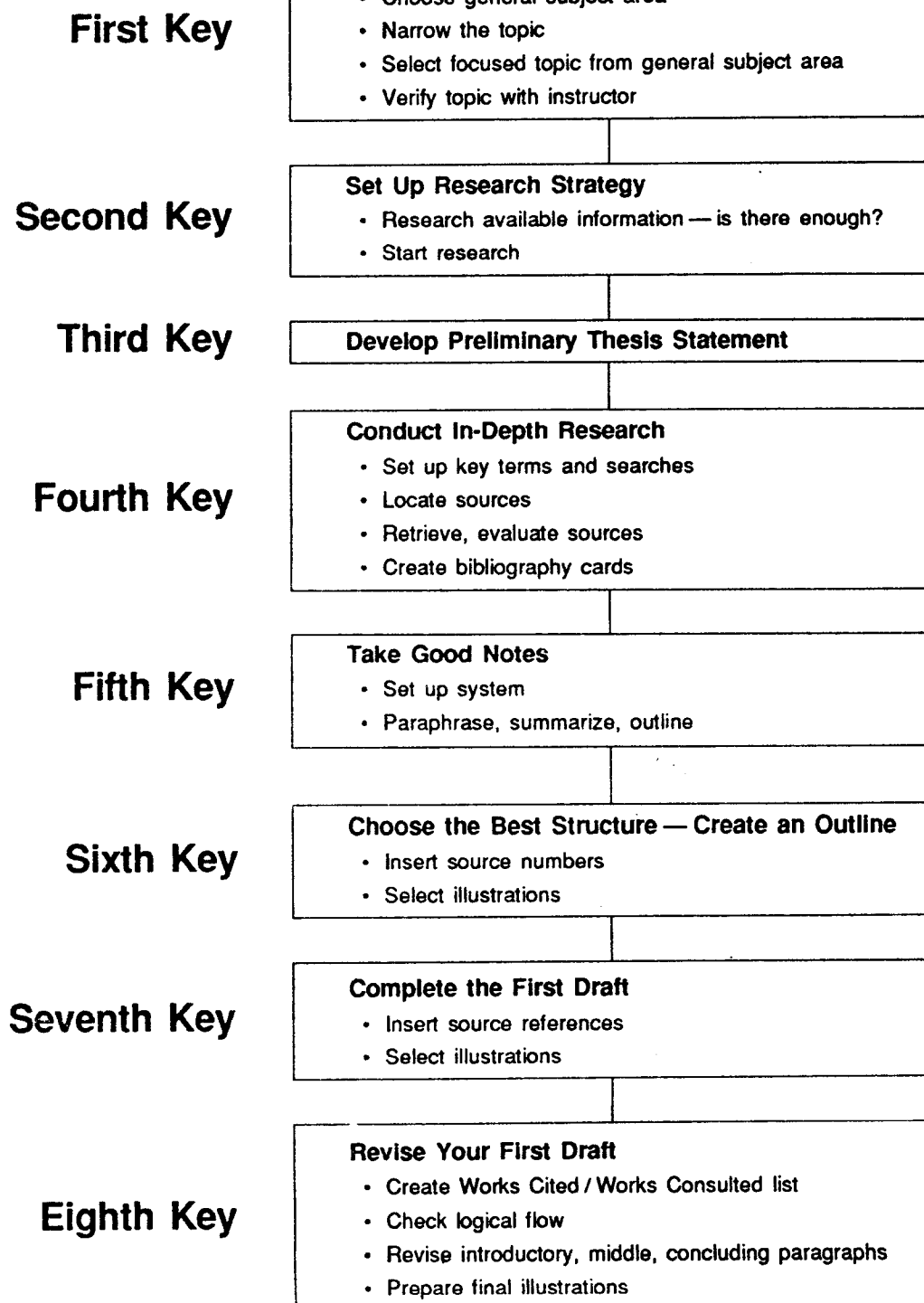
Second Key: Set Up a Research Strategy

Because your papers are usually written under tight deadlines, you need to know how to find information quickly and efficiently in any library. Chapter 1 presents a step-by-step strategy for conducting preliminary research on your topic. The strategy begins with general references and takes you through various research materials to books, periodicals, and special documents.

Third Key: Develop a Preliminary Thesis Statement

The thesis statement establishes what you want to say or prove in your paper. By following the guidelines in Chapter 2, you can quickly create a thesis statement based on your focused topic that sets the stage for your in-depth research. This statement acts like a general map guiding your research efforts.

Eight Keys to a First-Rate Paper



Fourth Key: Conduct In-Depth Research

Also in Chapter 2, you learn the six key steps of research that will save you hours of effort—for example, how to set up key-words and index terms for computer searches. Checklists for each type of paper help you determine what you really need to research about your subject.

The chapter also reviews the major resources found in a library, shows you how to retrieve hard-to-find information, and provides guidelines for evaluating the resources you uncover. Information is only as valuable as it is useful for your paper.

Fifth Key: Take Good Notes

Learn how to skim material for key words and concepts, then take notes on only the information pertinent to your topic. Chapter 2 shows you how to paraphrase, summarize, and outline material on your notecards and how to establish a note-taking system that will be invaluable in developing an outline and writing your first draft.

Sixth Key: Choose the Best Structure—Create an Outline

Once you know the basic structure of any term paper or report, and the particular arrangement of information for each type of paper, creating an outline is relatively painless. A good outline makes writing the first draft considerably easier. Chapter 3 provides detailed guidelines on how to tailor your outline for the structure of an argumentative, descriptive, position, or literary term paper or report.

Seventh Key: Complete the First Draft

If you suffer from fear of the blank page—relax. The key to writing the first draft is to set your critical mind aside and simply write until you have completed the paper. Begin at the beginning if you can. If you can't, start in the middle or at the end. Don't worry about elegant phrasing, paragraph structure, or grammatical mistakes at this stage. Use your outline as a guide and keep on writing until you finish. Save any criticisms or judgments for the final step.

Eighth Key: Revise Your First Draft

Revision can turn a mediocre or flawed first draft into a first-rate work. Chapter 4 presents five secrets for revising your first draft that can speed up the revision process. Whether you have one night or several days to work on your draft, these five secrets can help you to improve the logic, flow, and impact of your paper. If you are going to put time and effort into a term paper or report, why not make it the best one possible?

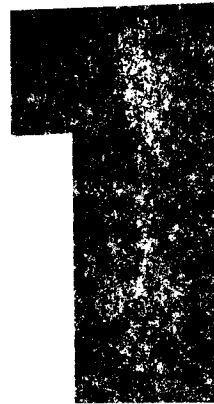
Special Features of This Book

In addition to the eight keys above, several special features of this book can help you develop a first-rate paper.

- *Grammar and style tips.* Chapter 5 provides a quick, easy reference for the grammar and style questions that often prove the most troublesome to students. This chapter helps you improve your writing style and correct any grammar mistakes.
- *Guidelines for typing and proofreading the paper.* Chapter 6 shows you how to prepare the Works Cited list. Chapter 8 provides guidelines for typing the title page, body, and special pages of your paper either on a typewriter or a word processor. A step-by-step proofreading system shows you how to check your paper for errors before handing it in.
- *How to use illustrations.* The right chart, map, or table can enhance the impact of your words. Chapter 7 discusses not only when to use illustrations but how to choose the best ones for your topic.
- *How to give an oral presentation.* Is part of your assignment an oral report based on your paper? Chapter 9 presents the four R's—respond, restructure, rehearse, relax—to help you create and deliver an effective oral presentation. You might even enjoy the process!
- *List of books on topics, research, and writing.* Appendix A contains a list of recommended books that can help you choose a topic, find the best resources quickly, and improve your writing style.
- *Sample term papers and reports.* Appendix B provides sample papers to show you how the principles and guidelines discussed in the book apply to the finished paper.

Whether you have to write a five-page report or a twenty-page term paper, the principles and guidelines provided in this book can make your next paper your best one.

PREPARING TO WRITE



1

Choosing and Focusing Your Topic

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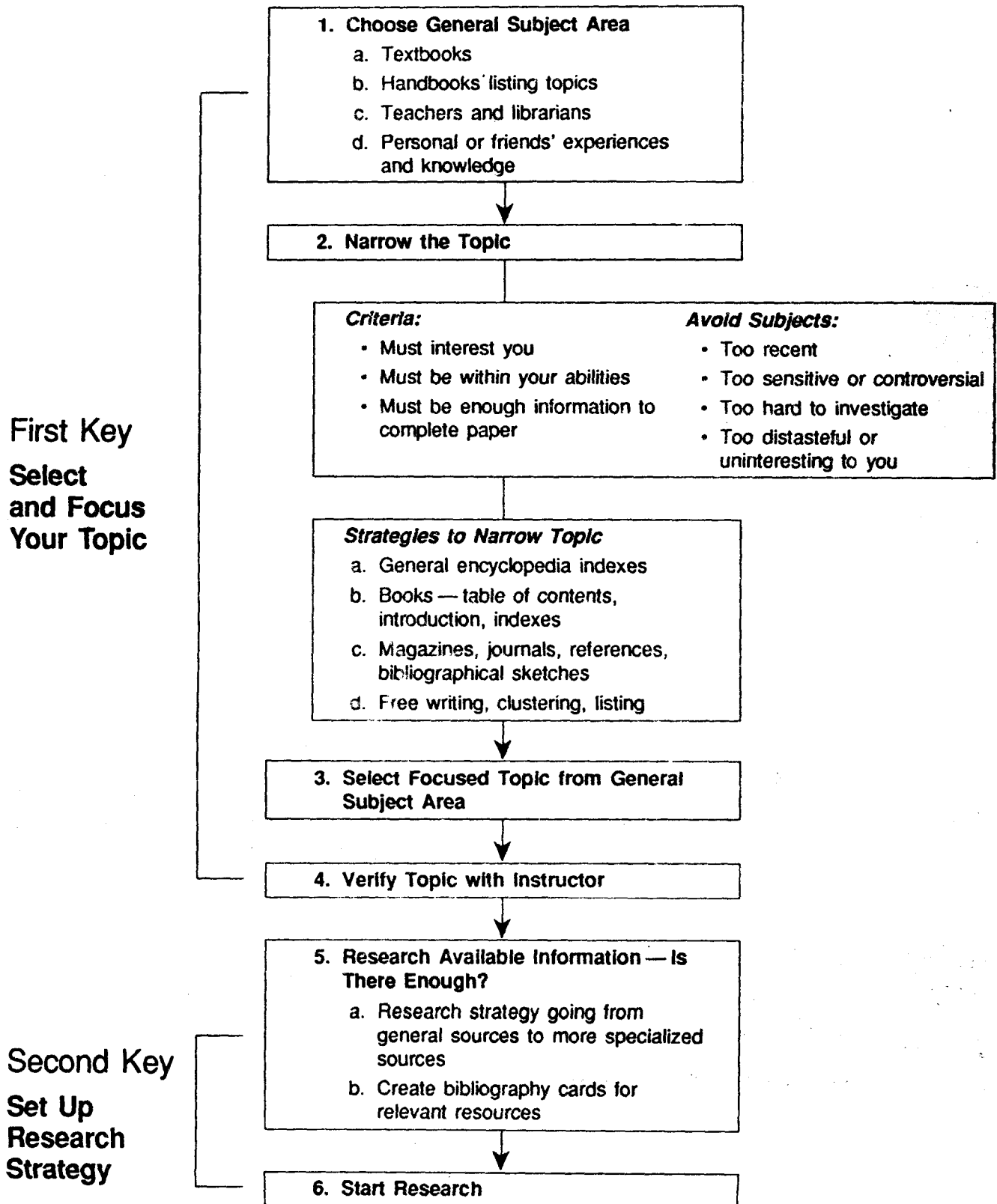
You've just been assigned a paper to write. If it's a report, you may have only a week or two to complete the assignment. If it's a term paper, you have up to two or three months. One look at your class load, however, and you know you'd better get started right away.

Your immediate problem is a practical one: What do you write about? Whether you are assigned a topic or must choose one yourself, the task is roughly the same. You must take a general topic, do preliminary research to narrow it down, and determine if there is enough information to complete a paper. From that point on, you can conduct your research, develop a thesis statement, create an outline, and start writing.

The task of selecting and focusing a topic is not a matter of trial and error but a process anyone can learn. You can use it for any paper you write in any humanities course from English to social studies to history.

This chapter offers several strategies to help you determine the subject of your paper. Once you have the topic clearly defined, you are halfway home. Figure 1.1 outlines the steps you need to take to develop a usable topic from selection to preliminary research.

FIGURE 1.1 Key Steps in Choosing a Topic for Literary, Argumentative, Position, or Descriptive Papers





Topics and Types of Papers

Your topic is largely determined by the type and length of the paper you are to write. In most cases you will be asked to write a literary, an argumentative, a position, or a descriptive paper. The length may vary from five to twenty-five typed pages, depending on whether it is a brief report or term paper.

- **Literary paper.** For this paper, you must select an author and analyze his or her works. You can either compare and contrast them or analyze a specific element within the works—for example, the author's use of imagery, theme, setting, character, or plot. You need to support your comparison and contrast or analysis using the opinions of critics and other writers you find through your research.
- **Argumentative paper.** In this type of paper, your topic must have two opposing points of view—for example, the United States should or should not ban all nuclear arms. You choose one point of view, discuss the pros and cons, and then build a logical argument for the position you have taken, backed up by your research.
- **Position paper.** The topic of this paper may have two opposing views, but you need to discuss only the side that supports your position. You do not have to argue against the opposing view, only mention it at the beginning.
- **Descriptive paper (or report).** For this paper, you simply discuss a topic that interests you—for example, the oldest trees in the world. You are not trying to argue for or against anything; you are merely reporting on a topic.

In addition to the type of paper, the length of the paper will also determine the topic you choose and the amount of research you conduct. Naturally, a short paper will have a more limited focus and require fewer resources than will a longer paper. Before starting a search for a topic, make sure you understand the type and length of paper you are assigned.

"What Should I Write About?"—How to Select Your Topic

At the beginning of this process, you may feel as if you've entered a strange territory without a map. You need guidelines for choosing your topic if you must select your own or for narrowing a general topic assigned to you. This section shows you how to get ideas for topics and what subjects are best to avoid.

Three Criteria for a Topic

Whether you write a literary, argumentative, position, or descriptive paper, the subject you select must meet three important criteria:

1. The topic should interest you.
2. It should be within your abilities.
3. There should be enough information available on it to complete a paper.

The first criterion is the most important. Something besides fear of failure has to sustain you through all the hours it takes to research, write, and revise a report or term paper. Make the paper a process of discovery for yourself—something *you* want to know or say about a topic. That desire will help to see you through to the end of the project.

The second criterion is also essential. You may be interested in a topic but not have the background or ability to handle it in a paper. Say, for example, you are interested in the flights of *Voyagers 1* and 2. You want to do a report on some of the computer programs that send commands to the small spacecrafts. The scientific journals are filled with complex diagrams and explanations, but you find none of it makes any sense to you. You have no background in computer programming and no ability to translate technical information into plain English.

You will either have to find a book or an article that translates the material for you or find another topic—perhaps what *Voyager 2* revealed about the rings of Uranus or the surprises the spacecraft uncovered as it passed by the outer planets. Although the topic about the computer programs fulfills two of the three criteria—it interests you and there is plenty of information—if it is beyond your abilities, you will not be able to complete a paper successfully.

Finally, make sure enough information is readily available for you to develop your paper. For instance, you may have heard about rock-and-roll bands springing up in Tibet. The subject intrigues you, and you feel you have enough musical background to write about it. But your preliminary research turns up only a half-page article in a weekly news magazine. Obviously, you are not going to be able to build a ten- or fifteen-page report on one short article. A better topic may be the rise of heavy metal bands in the Soviet Union, a phenomenon well covered in the U.S. and international press.

Finding a General Area of Interest

Suppose you must choose the topic of a paper yourself. Although this task might seem somewhat overwhelming at first, it can be broken down into manageable steps, as shown in Figure 1.1. The first step is knowing where to go for ideas about general or broad subject areas.

There are four major sources for topic ideas: textbooks, reference books that list term paper or report topics, teachers and librarians, and your own or your friends' interests and experiences. If you must do a term paper for a history course, for example, skim through your history textbook to find a broad subject area that interests you. Perhaps you find the European voyages of discovery appealing. Or your interest may be piqued by the medical practices of the Middle Ages or the complex politics of the present Middle East.

If your textbooks do not provide a topic of interest, investigate the reference section of any bookstore or library. You are likely to find books that list hundreds of term paper or report topics under all subject areas—history, literature, art, social science, political science, and psychology. One of these topics may appeal to you.

Teachers and librarians are also good sources for ideas. They can help you to pinpoint an area of interest or to suggest topics that you haven't considered. It is a good idea to get to know your reference librarian, and this can be one way to introduce yourself. Good reference librarians are invaluable guides through the maze of research and reference sources. Their expertise can save you hours of effort.

If none of these sources yields any results, you can fall back on yourself or on your friends. Think about the movies, magazines, books, or activities that interest you: science fiction, sports, the war on drugs, international relations, music, the environment, psychic phenomenon.

What would you like to know about these topics? What opinions do you have about them? Do you think drugs should be legalized? Do you feel that the government should do more or less to help protect the environment? In your opinion, have science fiction movies or TV series had any impact on shaping our current world? Should professional athletes be allowed to play in the Olympic games? Are psychic phenomena real or imaginary?

One of these four sources—textbooks, reference books, teachers and librarians, your own or your friends' interests—will give you a general topic area for your paper.

Subject Areas to Avoid

Part of the process of choosing a topic is knowing which subjects

not to use. In your search for a topic, keep in mind these guidelines for subjects to avoid.

- *Subjects that are too recent.* If a new law has just been passed, for example, there will not be enough information about its impact to serve as the subject of a paper.
- *Subjects that are too sensitive or controversial.* Some issues, such as the firing of a popular principal or a recent racial incident in school, are highly emotional and likely to provoke strong reactions on all sides. It is often difficult to find objective information to present a fair treatment of the topic.
- *Subjects that are hard to investigate.* This can include subjects that are too narrow or specialized to have much information, too technical for your own and the readers' background, or for which information is too difficult to acquire. For example, the information may be in specialized libraries closed to the public, in international institutions, or written in a language you cannot read.
- *Subjects that are distasteful or uninteresting to you.* You may be tempted to accept any topic just to have something to write about. However, material that is unappealing to you at the beginning will tend to become more so as you work on it. If you dislike the subject of your paper, it's a good bet your readers won't like the way you write about it. Your own distaste or boredom will come across in your writing.

Remember the three criteria mentioned previously as you search for a usable topic: It must interest you, it must be within your abilities, and there must be enough information readily available on the topic to complete a paper.

"I've Got a Subject, Now What?"

—How to Focus Your Topic

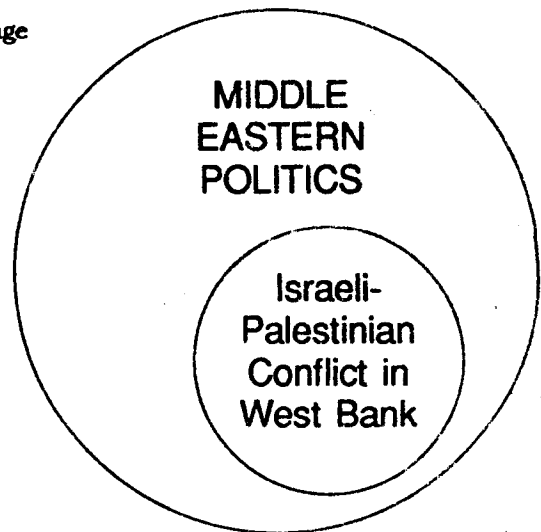
Once you have selected, or been assigned, a broad subject area, your next task is to narrow the topic for your paper. For instance, you may have a strong desire to write on Middle Eastern politics. Obviously, you can't cover such a broad subject in a five- to ten-page paper. You will have to come up with a more manageable topic.

From Wide-Angle to Close-Up

When you narrow a subject, you are choosing to discuss only a portion of all the things that can be said about that topic. It is

like moving from a wide-angle perspective to a close-up shot. The larger circle in Figure 1.2 represents everything known about the general subject (Middle Eastern politics). The smaller circle focuses only on one part of that subject—perhaps the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank. Everything outside that circle is outside the scope of your paper. Your

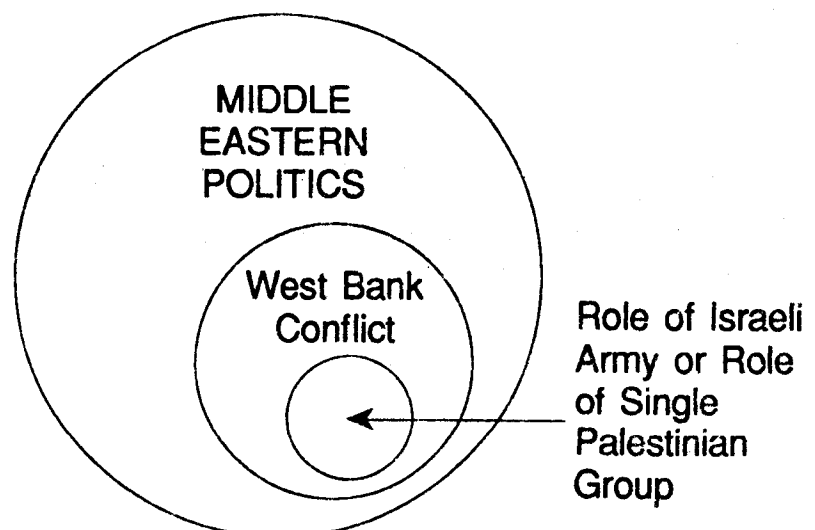
FIGURE 1.2 Narrowing Your Topic — First Stage



objective in narrowing the topic is to decide what should be included solely in that small circle.

You may have to take two steps to narrow your topic. For example, you may find the West Bank issue is still too broad a topic. You may want to narrow the focus further to the role the Israeli army has played in the conflict or to the actions of one of the Palestinian groups. In that case, you would draw a smaller circle inside the West Bank circle, as in Figure 1.3. Now you have a subject that can serve as the focus of your paper.

FIGURE 1.3 Narrowing Your Topic — Second Stage



Strategies to Narrow Topics

As outlined in Figure 1.1, several methods can help you narrow your topic: conducting preliminary research, free-writing, clustering, and listing. You may want to use a combination of these techniques to take full advantage of both your analytical and creative abilities.

Preliminary Research. Sources for preliminary research include encyclopedias, books, magazine articles, and various readers' guides and indexes.

To begin, look up your general topic in the index of a detailed encyclopedia such as *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *Encyclopedia Americana*, or *Colliers Encyclopedia*. For example, the index listings under "Egyptians" might include "burial practices" or "magic rituals." You would then read the article to see if narrowing the topic to "magic rituals" is something that would interest you. You might find that you want to narrow "magic rituals" further to cover only the rituals that apply to healing. The article in the encyclopedia will give you an overview of the important divisions of your topic.

If your topic is not covered adequately in the encyclopedia, then look through the library card catalog or computer catalog to locate a book about the general subject. Study the book's table of contents, introduction, or index to see if some part of the larger subject catches your interest. For example, a book on the greenhouse effect might have chapters on how human health will be affected, suspected causes of the effect, or what steps people can take now to lessen its impact. Another book might have a chapter arguing that the alarm over the greenhouse effect is exaggerated and that natural weather cycles are responsible for worldwide temperature increases. Any of these chapters might suggest a narrower focus for the general topic of greenhouse effect.

If there is no book on your general subject, search for magazine, journal, or newspaper articles in the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, in computer data bases such as INFOTRAC, or in specialized indexes compiled on various topics. Ask the librarian to help you locate these sources.

Free-writing, Clustering, and Listing. If your preliminary research has not helped you narrow your topic or if your focused topic is still too broad, you can use free-writing, clustering, and listing to help choose a suitable focus.

These techniques make use of your mind's natural ability to organize information and store it in logical form. People are often pleasantly surprised by how much more they know about a subject than they realized or by the thought-provoking ques-