Narrowing Your Research Topic
Contributors: Derrian Goebel

Narrowing a research topic is moving from a general topic, like global warming, to a tighter research focus, such as helping the environment by improving travel modes (example below). However, you can’t just forget about the big picture—how your argument/claim fits into the bigger discussion including connections to other viewpoints on your topic.

To ensure a connection with other viewpoints and the bigger picture, ask yourself some questions when revising your paper:

- Are you showing readers how your narrowed topic effects, or relates to, the bigger picture?
- When going through each topic point, do you acknowledge opposing viewpoints?
- When you are ready to relate your narrowed topic to the bigger picture, do you mention other topics included in the larger discussion?

Example:

Bigger picture: “Solving Global Warming —Do Something” is the larger discussion about climate change and the environment. “Use Less,” “Plant Trees,” and “Be a Catalyst” are some branches stemming from the larger discussion. The “best travel” topic (in yellow box) is only one part of the global warming bigger picture (outside the little yellow box).
Articulate the multiple standpoints within the **bigger picture**:

- So, for example in the previous picture, you will need to be able to locate your narrowed topic (best travel) in relation to the other parts of the main issue.
- Show your readers how your focused subject is connected to these other conversations.

Narrowed research topic: how people can buy hybrid/electric cars, car pool with co-workers, walk, bike, or use public transportation (above). Opposing viewpoints are ones that argue within your focused area (the yellow square).

Explore the multiple arguments, perspectives, and alternative positions within your narrowed research topic:

- Take the time and give fair consideration to these other perspectives, which will benefit your argument by offering readers a fair report.
  - For example, not everyone will live close enough to their work to walk or ride a bike. These, too, are parts of the argument—they are the alternative point(s) of view.
  - If you can argue, then do so: “People may not be able to walk or ride a bike, but what about the bus?” Otherwise, it is best to simply acknowledge and move on: “…which is a good point.” This is an example of fair reporting.

So overall, when your teacher asks you to focus your research, don’t forget that connection to the bigger discussion in which you were initially interested. Also, don’t forget other opinions for a fair and balanced essay.