Narrowing a Topic

It is important to narrow your topic so that you cover the material as completely as possible within the speech’s timeframe. You want your topic to be focused, but not so narrow that it becomes too specialized. When choosing what to talk about, consider a topic that is familiar to you, or something you may want to understand more.

**Consider the audience, the occasion, and your own interests and experiences:**
- To whom are you speaking? Consider the audience’s interests and conduct an audience analysis.
- Why have you been invited to speak? This will often dictate appropriate topic options.
- What is the occasion? Can this guide your topic selection further?
- What do you like to do? Could you speak on this?
- What experiences do you have that might be interesting to speak about (e.g., travel, hobbies, and events)?

**Use resources to help you:**
- Ask a librarian (see the link on the library homepage)
- Use the library database
- Practice brainstorming
- Scan online directories and webpages
- Listen and read for topic ideas
- Make an appointment in the Speaking Center
- Talk to your instructor

**Ask questions:**
If you have a general idea ask the following questions:
- **Who:** Who created it, works with it, uses it, needs it, or represents it?
- **What:** What elements make up your topic? What parts go into making it what it is?
- **Where:** Where is it made? Where is it distributed? Where is it used?
- **When:** What is the history of its creation? Does it fall into a particular timeframe?
- **Why:** Why was it created? Why is it important? Why does it matter?
- **How:** How do people feel about it? How does it affect people? How has it made a difference?

Answering these questions will help to narrow your topic; anyone of these answers may become your more narrowed topic.

Once you have selected a topic, it is important to narrow your idea in order to cover the topic as completely as possible within the timeframe. One way to identify more specific ideas is to brainstorm using a deductive approach. See back for a detailed example.
**Deductive approach:**

Begin with a possible topic. Below, we will use tennis as an example. Break the topic into three main points (e.g., history, equipment, and tournaments). From these three main points, pick your favorite (history). Then, break this new topic into three new points (e.g., how it began, influential people, and current times).

Try to do it again: pick your favorite of the three points (influential people) and break it into three new points again (e.g., Althea Gibson, Arthur Ashe, and Andre Agassi). The goal is to get the topic into the smallest points possible in order to cover the material as completely as possible.

For example:

Your final breakdown may look like this:

Depending on the goal of the speech and your time limit the topic may be influential people, Andre Agassi, or just his awards. Generally, the shorter the time limit the more specific the topic will be.

Once you have narrowed down your topic to manageable parts, you are ready for the next steps: finding support, organizing, and practicing. See our other guidesheets, or make an appointment with a Speaking Center consultant, for help with these steps.