Finding a History Paper Topic

Coming up with a research idea can be one of the hardest parts of the writing process. Here are a few suggestions for finding a good topic, on your own, with friends, at home, or in the library.

**Brainstorming**

- Look at the class syllabus or your notes from class, or ask your teacher for a list of all the topics covered in class. It may remind you of something you’ve already studied that interested you.

- Read through the assignment or your notes from class and choose one of the topics or questions you find there. Do a freewriting exercise in which you write continually for 10 minutes on that topic, without lifting your pen from the paper or your fingers from the keyboard. When you are finished, set aside what you have written for an hour or so. Then go back to it and see if anything there looks interesting to you.

- A simple one, to do by yourself or with a partner or small group: List any and all topics you can think of that are connected in any way with the class or the assignment. Don’t worry, at this stage, about how good your ideas are. Just get down on paper as many as possible. Set your list aside, then look at it later with fresh eyes to see if anything there is worth pursuing. If you are working with others, you can swap lists to see if your friends have thought of anything else that would interest you.

- Although Wikipedia is not a reliable source for your actual research, it can be useful in the beginning of the paper-writing process. Look up some topics from your class on Wikipedia, and follow any links that catch your eye. You may turn up something you wouldn’t have thought of otherwise. Remember, the library also has a number of good encyclopedia sets and online databases where you can browse topics and see where they lead you.

**Using the Library**

- If you’re interested in a particular region, but you’re having trouble coming up with a topic in its history, it may be helpful to look through the library’s shelves and see which subjects turn up. Find your area’s Dewey number in the list below, then browse the shelves with that number to find books on various topics.

  - 930-939 Ancient History
  - 940-949 European History
    - 940.53 World War II
    - 941-2 British Isles (England, Ireland, Scotland & Wales)
    - 943 Central Europe, Germany
    - 944 France & Monaco
    - 945 Italian Peninsula
    - 946 Iberian Peninsula (Spain, Portugal)
    - 947 Eastern Europe, Soviet Union/Russia
    - 948 Northern Europe, Scandinavia
  - 950-959 Asian/Middle Eastern History
  - 960-969 African History
  - 970-979 North American History
    - 973 United States
    - 973.7 Civil War
    - 976.8 Tennessee
  - 980-989 South American History

- You can find plenty of ideas by looking through the library’s databases. Start with these (all published by Facts on File):

  - American History Online
  - Ancient History Online
  - Modern World History Online