



Center for Writing and Speaking

E NO. 11 IN THE CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING HANDOUT SERIES

Narrowing Scope

Most work with scope comes in the earlier stages of the writing process, often before you begin putting words on the page. Finding a suitable scope for your topic allows you to delve deeply into your argument, and that depth will give you the opportunity to contribute something original to a critical discussion. If your scope is too broad, you will not be able to fully engage with your issue. The key is narrowing your focus.

Scope refers to the breadth and complexity of the central concern of your paper, including all of the points that you must establish for your readers to understand your central concern, as well as all of the significant issues that you must address in order to present a fair, well-considered argument.

Flexibility is the key to determining scope.

- Be willing to set aside or throw out ideas that don't fit your developing topic.
- Be prepared to develop your paper around one sub-point rather than around the main points you originally conceived of.

Narrowing your scope helps you to write more. If your scope is too wide, the paper will be filled with sweeping generalizations; and if you only glaze the surface of your points, you will fall short of the page limit.

Tips for narrowing your focus

Make yourself define key terms in your topic, even if they seem simple.

- **Original Topic:** The reactions of the Indian people to colonialism during the Victorian Era
 - ✓ **Ask yourself:** What do I mean by “reactions?”—emotional reactions of the colonized. What do I mean by “colonialism?”—the spread of a foreign culture by force. Who do I mean by “the Indian people?”—academics within Indian society
- **New Topic:** The effects of English educational practices on Indian universities in the Victorian Era

Avoid writing about abstract categories such as “society,” “life,” “death,” “love,” “time,” etc. If you use the term “society,” defining what you mean will automatically narrow your focus. For example, don't write about how society harms women. Write about how the values of a particular religious sect in a particular time and place (a branch of society) lead women to feel ashamed if they do not want children (a way in which society harms women).

Examples of scope too big for any project:

- Women in society
- Love, death, beauty, and time in the novels of Virginia Woolf

Talk to your instructors and CWS tutors. Instructors want you to narrow your scope. They will be glad to help you.

AGNES SCOTT