

FINDING A SUBJECT

The Five Commandments for Finding a (Good) Subject

1. Never say, "I don't have anything to write about." You *do* have something to write about. Your life is not boring. You only *think* it is. You have lived at least eighteen years by now. Something interesting has happened to you.
2. Write about something you are interested in and informed about.
3. If you are interested in something, but are not informed about it, you must be willing to research it. (Yes, that means the library!)
4. You must write about something an audience would be interested in reading about. (If you can find someone interested in reading about the sex life of a boa constrictor, fine!)
5. Learn how to narrow a subject.

Exercise 1: Interest Inventory*

What are you interested in? Take ten or fifteen minutes to list a few items for each of these (very) general categories. Don't just sit and think. Brainstorm. Write whatever pops into your head.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| a. friends | i. sports |
| b. enemies | j. university life |
| c. people you admire | k. books |
| d. special places | m. music |
| e. fond memories | n. film |
| f. not-so-fond memories | o. what matters most |
| g. worries | |
| h. strange-but-true stories | |

*This list is borrowed from Stephen Judy's article "The Experiential Approach" in *Eight Approaches*.

Learning to Narrow a General Subject

Sports is a general subject. Volumes of books have been written about sports. There is no possible way you could say anything meaningful about such a general subject in a 500-700 word essay. What follows is a subject spectrum in which a general subject is narrowed, then narrowed again and again until it is narrow enough for a freshman composition essay.

General					Specific
sports	football	LSU football	LSU quarterback Tommy Hodson	Hodson's football career	Hodson's 1988 football season

Isn't it amazing how narrow a general subject can become? I could have narrowed this subject even further by talking about Hodson's playing in the 1988 LSU-Tulane game. However, I thought that might be a bit too narrow. The wonderful aspect of creating a subject spectrum is that you can always move to the next less specific topic if your topic proves to be too narrow to provide enough information for your paper.

Exercise 2: Practicing Narrowing Subjects

Create a subject spectrum for each of the following subjects. Narrow them as much as you can.

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| a. The Olympics | e. Shakespeare |
| b. horror movies | f. popular music |
| c. holidays | g. college dorms |
| d. my best friend | h. money |

Exercise 3: Finding Your Own Subjects

Choose five subjects from the list you created in exercise 1. Choose ones you are especially interested in and informed about. Create a subject spectrum for these subjects.

Congratulations! You have found some limited subjects. The next step is to create a thesis so that your subject will work in the kind of paper you are writing (i.e. informative, evaluative).

Liggett/English 1001

SHOW NOT TELL TIME

Remember show and tell time in elementary school? It wasn't enough to stand up and tell about the sea shells you collected on the beach over spring vacation; you had to wrap each one in kleenex, pack them in a shoe box, carry them carefully to school, pass them around, and let other students investigate them in order to share your experience and to keep your audience's attention. The same principle applies in writing. If you want to get your point across, you must not only tell your readers what you are thinking, but you must show them as well. Consider the following example:

In "Graduation in Stamps," Maya Angelou wants her readers to understand the shame and frustration that she felt for her race during the ceremony. She doesn't tell her readers this; she shows them:

The man's dead words fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly. Constrained by hard-learned manners I couldn't look behind me, but to my left and right the proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads. Every girl in my row had found something new to do with her handkerchief. Some folded the tiny squares into love knots, some into triangles, but most were wadding them, then pressing them flat on their yellow laps.

- . . . -

We were maids and farmers, handymen and washewomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farciacal and presumptuous.

Your personal experience essay will be much better if you too SHOW more than you TELL. For example, one student who was re-creating a favorite memory told about having her first cigarette: "I slowly sucked the stick and felt a warm sensation fill my chest. A chill ran down my spine as I smiled and exhaled." An alert reader will challenge the writer on two points: Did the smoker experience no discomfort? Is there not a better way to show how she felt than to rely on the cliché, "a chill ran down my spine"?

The writer took the challenge and rewrote her description this way: "I slowly lifted my cigarette until it touched my lips. I sucked the stick and a cloud of warm smoke filled my chest. Suddenly I felt nauseated and my chest felt like a bomb ready to explode. I spit the smoke out and coughed. My eyes began to water, but I managed a grin."

Now you try it. Develop 3 of these sentences into well written paragraphs in which you show more than tell the point you are making. The original sentence should not appear in your paragraph.

The concert was fantastic.
She has a nice personality.
LSU students have school spirit.

My family and I are close.
Traveling is a lot of fun.
I was so embarrassed.