

Finding an Idea: The Long Paper

At first glance, it seems like finding an idea for a long paper means finding a really broad topic, like “the view of war through the centuries” or “the medieval system of justice,” right? Actually, though these broad topics are a good place to start, narrowing broad topics like those down to a very specific idea will actually make it easier to write a long paper, because you’ll have more details to include. So, how do you develop a specific idea? The following steps outline one process of developing a specific topic. Your process may not look exactly like this, but it does need to contain each of these elements.

Step One: Brainstorm Topics that Interest You

You will spend quite a bit of time with your topic when you are writing a long paper. Because of this, it is important to spend time thinking about topics that interest you and that you think are important, instead of simply choosing the topic that first comes to mind. For example, when I am choosing a topic, I usually get out my notebook and start writing:

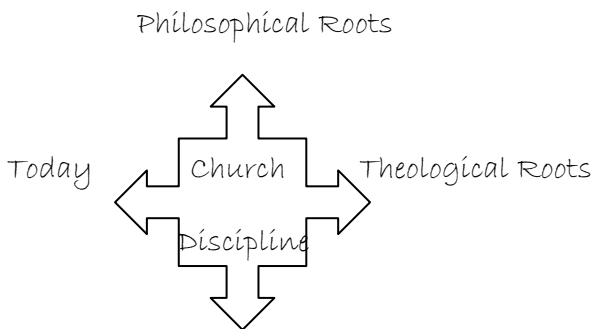
Possible Ideas:

A theme that carries over through the centuries – love, justice, the arts, place of earth in universe

~~Place of earth in universe~~ – relates to worldview too broad – not interesting enough to me

Love, romantic love, development of the concept of romance, was this a fiction?

Justice, systems of rewards and punishments, justice/discipline in the church – what were the foundations for church discipline through the centuries? Did they draw on the Bible exclusively, or use other sources as well? How has church discipline changed?



Difference between Catholic and Protestant

You may develop a different method of brainstorming, but whatever your method, make sure you don’t skip this step!

Step Two: Research

Start gathering material and taking notes on your (narrower) topic. In my case, I would research the philosophies behind church discipline in different periods of church history.

Step Three: Take Preliminary Notes/ Continue to Brainstorm

After you have begun research, you can begin to narrow your focus by asking several questions:

- Are there themes in the notes I have taken?
- What primarily interests me about the topic I have chosen?
- Do I have the beginning of an argument?

I typically begin to freewrite to see if any themes or arguments begin to emerge:

There has always been a philosophy behind church discipline. The way scholars interpreted texts on church discipline was influenced by their philosophical background, and the way they practiced church discipline reflected philosophical assumptions about the nature of law and the church's relationship with law. But, is there a one-to-one correlation? Was the medieval church's discipline different from Protestant discipline only because they are relying on a different philosophical system? Is today's church discipline system (or lack of it) only a reflection of our postmodern society? Are there trends of discipline in the church that are independent of philosophy? Is being influenced by secular philosophy unavoidable? Inherently wrong?

At this point, my focus of research might change to something more specific: Aristotle vs. Enlightenment philosophers and their influence on church discipline. Or, I might change my focus to the areas of church discipline that have been consistent through the centuries, and begin to research a related question: Has the goal of church discipline always been the same?

Step Four: Continue to Research/ Brainstorm

Each time you narrow your topic to something more specific, return to your sources (and perhaps look for more sources) to find information on this narrower topic. You may be surprised at information you had previously overlooked that is central to your new narrowed topic.

Step Five: Develop a Working Thesis Statement (see Thesis Handout) and Begin to Write

The test of whether or not you have a topic that will enable you to write a long paper is the process of writing itself. Did you run out of ideas on the second page? Perhaps your topic is too specific, or perhaps your working thesis statement states a fact rather than an argument. Or, did you find yourself writing a little about everything rather than delving into the specifics of a unified argument? If so, it's time to go back to the brainstorming and free-writing stage to narrow your topic.

If you have any questions about this process, or if you find yourself stuck as you are developing your topic or your argument, remember: the Writing Center is always available as a resource to help you write the long (or the short) paper.