



Lesson 1.1

Bringing Your Message Down to Earth

Have you ever seen one of those pictures of the Earth taken from a satellite or space shuttle? Even though you might recognize Earth and say “Hey—that’s home!”, you would have to zoom closer and closer to see your continent . . . country . . . state or province . . . city . . . street . . . and finally your actual residence. In the early stages of writing, topics sometimes start out as big as that far-away view of Earth. Writing about such topics is a daunting task—and what’s more, it results in generalizations: *Earth is a special place*. Readers don’t want generalizations. They want close-up, specific details: *Our place is home to five kids, three cats, an iguana named Harry, and a boa constrictor named Ethel*.

Hear the difference? In this lesson, you’ll have a chance to take a daunting topic down to manageable size—the size you could write about in 15 minutes.

Sharing an Example: *Exploding Ants*

In her book, *Exploding Ants: Amazing Facts About How Animals Adapt*, author and biology professor Joanne Settel, Ph.D., focuses on the ingenious ways some creatures find to survive. This precise focus actually makes her writing easier since there are so many things she doesn’t need to include. Consider this sample passage about how the liver fluke survives by getting itself eaten—not just once, but three times.





The tiny wormlike fluke is a parasite that spends different parts of its life inside the bodies of three different host animals: a snail, an ant, and a sheep. The fluke must get inside each host by being eaten. It uses its amazing reprogramming skills to get itself into the mouth of a hungry sheep.

Liver flukes actually begin their lives inside a snail. The snail starts things off when it eats some sheep dung filled with liver fluke eggs. Inside the snail, the eggs hatch, releasing thousands of tiny larvae (young flukes). As many as six thousand mucus-covered fluke larvae then gather together into a squirming ball. Eventually the snail ejects this grape-sized glob from its body.

The next step in the fluke's life cycle takes place when an ant feeds on the mucus ball. This brings the larvae into the ant's stomach, where they bore into the stomach wall. Most of the larvae remain here and grow into adult flukes.

Exploding Ants

by Joanne Settel, Ph.D.

What Did You Learn?

Write three things you learned about flukes from the close-up view in this passage:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Which of the following comes closest to stating the main idea of Settel's passage?

- The world is full of interesting animals.
- The tiny fluke is a parasite with an unusual life cycle.
- Sheep actually survive by eating flukes.



Test the Doctor

Take one more look at Dr. Settel's passage on liver flukes, pencil in hand. As you go through it, mark each sentence **G** for general (*Liver flukes are cool!*) or **S** for specific—meaning the statement teaches you something about liver flukes. How did Dr. Settel do?

From Galactic to Specific

We don't know exactly how Dr. Settel came up with the idea to write about liver flukes, but let's imagine she started with a gigantic topic: *Living Things*. She would certainly have had to narrow that topic down—and it might have taken her several steps to get from *Living Things* to *Liver Flukes*. Her steps might have looked something like this:

- Living things (Galactic)
- Animals
- Animals with unusual life cycles
- Parasites
- Parasites with life cycles connected to ants
- Liver flukes (Specific)

Now imagine a writer creating another essay. Following are some topics the writer might consider. They're listed randomly. Work with a partner to put them in order—from galactic to specific. As you work, imagine yourself as a kind of human search engine, bringing in the focus tighter and tighter, until you bring your topic from outer space . . . right down to Earth.

Random List of Topics

- The Venus flytrap
- Plants
- The difficulties of growing a Venus flytrap as a potted plant
- Living things
- Unusual plants
- Carnivorous plants



Same Topics Arranged From Galactic to Specific

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

Reflecting

Reflect for a moment on this narrowing process. How does a writer know when a topic is small enough to write about?

Narrowing Your Own Topic

Let's suppose your teacher has asked you to write a short essay on one of the following topics:

- Ethics
- Sports
- Politics
- Entertainment
- Education

You'd need a lifetime to research any one of these topics. Unfortunately, you only have about 20 minutes to prewrite (narrow your topic) and write a short essay. So—this is about survival!



Start by narrowing your topic. It may take you two or three steps—or more. Work with a partner. Begin with the same BIG topic; you do not have to wind up with identical narrow topics, however. Once you reach a certain point in the narrowing process, your personal interests may pull you in different directions.

Our BIG topic: _____

Going smaller and smaller . . .

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

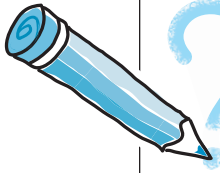
My focused, narrow topic: _____

Small Topic = Short Essay

If you've narrowed your topic enough, this part should be easy! On your own scratch paper, write for 15 minutes, sharing what you know about your small topic. Make it personal and focused. Think *my home* versus *Earth from outer space*. Keep the pencil moving—and keep your reader's attention.

Share and Compare

Share your essay with a partner or in a writing circle. Did everyone wind up with a topic small enough to manage easily? If not, talk about ways to narrow some topics further.



A Writer's Question

What happens to the writer's details when the topic is too big?



Putting It to the Test

How could this practice of narrowing a topic help you in a testing situation? For example, what could you do with these common writing prompts?

- A Day I'll Always Remember
- A Memorable Experience
- The Most Important Invention Ever