



Lesson 1.2

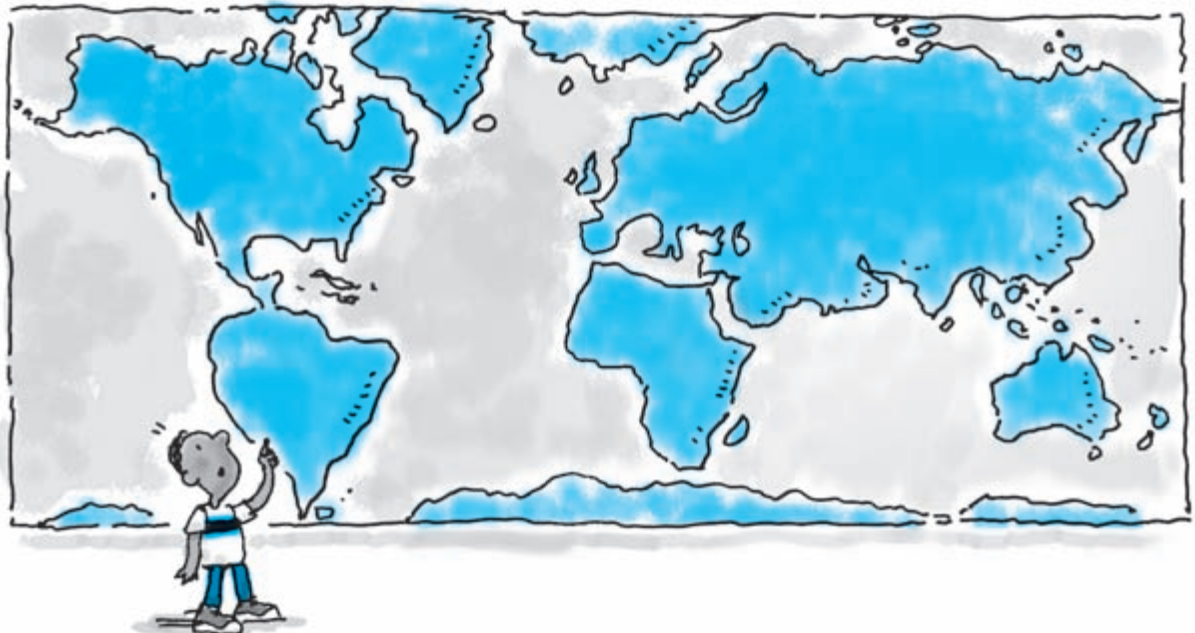
Narrowing Your Topic

You're having one of those days . . . You only have one clean sheet of paper left. Your arm feels as heavy as lead. Your pen is almost out of ink and you can't find another and now your teacher wants you to write *everything you know* about one of these topics:

- Sports
- History of the World
- Living Things
- The Universe (*Oh, no. . . !*)

Hey! *Hey!! HEY, wake UP!!!!*

Whew. You're only dreaming. Lucky thing, too, because if you are like most writers, you know that topics like these are *waaay* too big and broad to tackle. The surprising thing is, though, that many young writers assign themselves big topics just like these—even when they have a choice. That's like trying to find a street in Riverton, Wyoming, by viewing Earth from outer space. Why make it so difficult when there's a simple solution? Come with us . . .





Listening to Your Inner Navigator

Perhaps you have used a GPS (Global Positioning System) at some time to find your way to a new site—or to navigate an unfamiliar road. A GPS pinpoints your location and guides you, using visuals and aural directions, to your destination.

As a writer, you can narrow a big topic down to size by activating your *inner navigator* or **TPS**—**T**opic **P**inpointing **S**ystem. (Really, your TPS is nothing more than your writing brain on high power.) To activate your TPS, ask yourself questions that start with words like *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, or *how*. Your answers will whittle a big, sprawling topic down to manageable size. Here's an example.

TPS in Action

Big, Overwhelming, Vast, and Sprawly Topic: Sports

1. Inner Navigator: **What** do you want to say about sports?
2. Writer's Answer: I want to talk about an outdoor sport I love.
3. New Topic: Lacrosse (Smaller, but still too big for comfort.)
1. Inner Navigator: **What** do you like about lacrosse?
2. Writer's Answer: I like the action, equipment, and *history*!
3. New Topic: History of Lacrosse (Close, but we need an angle.)
1. Inner Navigator: **Why** is the sport's history so interesting?
2. Writer's Answer: Lacrosse was first played by Native Americans—but it has changed.
3. New topic: Native American Roots of Lacrosse (Ah—now we're getting somewhere!)



1. Inner Navigator: **How** will you show the ways it has changed?
2. Writer’s Answer: I will compare modern Lacrosse to the earlier version.
3. Final topic: Native American Lacrosse versus Today’s Game
(Finally! Under control!)

You’re the Navigator

Where do those “inner navigator” questions come from? From YOU. So . . . it’s time to activate your own TPS and see if you can narrow one of our topics down to size. (Later, you’ll work on one of your own.)

This time around, work alone. You can then compare your final topic with the one your partner chooses. Good writers tend to be independent thinkers, so don’t be surprised if your final topics are completely different!

Start with this Big Topic: Animals

Remember to

- ask yourself questions. (Put your TPS to work!)
- make your topic smaller and smaller, one step at a time.
- make the topic personal—aim for a small topic YOU know and like.
- use key words to help you think of helpful questions: *who, what, when, where, how, and why.*

Big Topic: Animals

1. Inner Navigator Question: _____
 2. Writer’s Answer: _____
 3. New topic: _____
-
1. Question: _____
 2. New topic: _____



1. Question: _____

2. New topic: _____

1. Question: _____

2. New topic: _____

1. One Last Question: _____

2. Final topic: _____

Do you like your final topic? If not, narrow it further.
YOU are the navigator!

Share and Compare

Compare your final topic with the one your partner came up with. Did you go in different directions? Which of the following is true?

- Our final topics are just about identical!
- Our topics are different—mostly because one topic is still way too big!
- Our topics are different, but both of us would be ready to write.

Charting Your Own Waters

This time, begin with a BIG topic of your own. Here are a few ideas—but, by all means, choose any topic you like:

- Politics
- Food
- Technology
- Entertainment

Remember, ask as many questions as you need in order to narrow your topic and feel *ready* to write. (That feeling of readiness is how you know your topic is small enough.)

Hint: It may only take two or three questions to narrow some topics and five or six questions to narrow others.



My Original Oversized Topic: _____

1. First Question: _____

2. New topic: _____

1. Next Question: _____

2. New, smaller topic: _____

1. Next Question: _____

2. Still smaller topic: _____

1. Next Question: _____

2. A smaller topic yet: _____

1. One Last Question: _____

2. Final oh-so-manageable topic: _____

Do you like your final topic? If not, narrow it further—or begin again. Don't write a single word until YOU, the navigator, are satisfied.

Share and Compare

Compare your final topic with your partner's. Is either topic still too big? If so, help your partner (or let your partner help you) make that topic smaller.

When both topics are small enough (*Hey—how will you know that again?*), write for 10 minutes or more, using your own paper.



A Writer's Questions

What is the biggest benefit to the *writer* in narrowing a topic before starting to write? What is the biggest benefit to the *reader* when a writer begins with a narrow topic instead of one that's too big?

Benefit to the Writer:

Benefit to the Reader:



Putting It to the Test

You are taking a writing test and the topic feels really big. It might be one of these:

- Describe a day you'll never forget.
- Describe a person who has influenced you.

How could you use the strategies from this lesson to make that topic a little smaller and easier to manage when writing time is short?