

TRAIT FOCUS: IDEAS

Lesson Objective

Students narrow a big topic idea into one that is focused and manageable.

Narrowing the Writer's Topic

As middle school students mature into more sophisticated writers and thinkers, they will sometimes have difficulty settling on a single, focused topic on which to write. Their views of the world are expanding, and as a result, they may wish to convey all of their new knowledge on a subject to paper. Unable to decide on one thing, they write on everything, but only at a general level. This produces writing that is unfocused and, in actuality, says very little.

It is important for student writers to learn to hone their ideas into something that is manageable within the parameters of the writing assignment. It helps to practice narrowing general topic categories into specific ideas so that students see the practice in action. Once able to narrow their own focuses this way, student writing will become more direct, clear, and effective.

The novel *Old Yeller* by Fred Gipson is an excellent mentor text with a strong focus of ideas. Integrate the following Literature/Writing Connection lesson into your discussion of the novel as a way of instructing your students on how to narrow their topics for writing.

Story Overview

A classic of American literature, *Old Yeller* tells the story of a boy and his yellow dog. They are Texas frontier settlers in the late 1800s. The father, Jim Coates, is often away for long stretches of time on cattle drives. In his absence, the family comes to rely on Travis and his dog.

The novel reflects the gritty and difficult lives of the Coates family. Through their struggles, they experience both good times and bad, and the novel's ending stands as moving and heart-wrenching.

Don't Bite Off More Than You Can Chew

1. As part of your instruction on prewriting and selecting an idea, discuss what it means to write on a focused, manageable topic. Big topics cannot be fully explored within a 2 to 5 page paper. A writer cannot hope to tackle the entire subject of the American Revolution in a single essay. Narrow topics give a specific interest or perspective. "Hardships suffered at Valley Forge" is limited enough to generate a well-developed piece of writing.
2. Share with your students that one strategy for narrowing a big topic is to ask questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how. The answers can inspire more questions and more answers. The deeper the writer delves into areas of interest, the more he or she will whittle the big topic down.
3. Inform your students that they will now be discussing an excerpt from a novel on the big topic of "American frontier life." Choose your favorite passage from *Old Yeller* and read it to the class.
4. The story focuses on a single frontier family, the Coates. It is the perfect topic for a manageable novel. Under the big topic of "American frontier life," Gipson might have covered the way houses were built, large settlements of the period, weapons or food, or affairs with the American Indians.
5. Instead, Gipson tells his story through a single chain of events—Travis and his yellow dog. Even with this focus, he is able to write a well-developed snapshot of the big topic.
6. Write the story's big topic on the board: "American frontier life." Now, have your students narrow this topic on a piece of paper using the questions strategy: who, what, when, where, why, and how. Have them go through at least two iterations of questioning so that their ideas are as specific as possible.
7. Extend the lesson by having your students write out their topic ideas into a full writing assignment.