Choosing a Research Topic

Start EARLY.
Choosing and researching a topic are iterative processes. Give yourself plenty of time to refine or redefine your topic.

Read the assignment carefully.
Are you choosing a topic for a two page paper or a twenty page paper? Are you being asked to present both sides of an issue or to take a position? Will you be presenting pure research or sharing your personal reflections?

Brainstorm ideas.
Have any of the class lectures or readings particularly interested you? Can ideas from other courses be integrated here? Is there anything in your personal experience you’d like to explore? Did you enroll in this class hoping to learn something specific?

Identify your interests and passions.
You might be working on this topic for an entire semester. Choose something that you’re curious or excited about.
Find general background information on a broad SUBJECT.
See what aspects of this subject are being written about. Do any of these incorporate your interests/passions?

For example, find general information on the broad SUBJECT - AMERICAN CULTURE.

Some ways to do this:

- Use ENCORE to search St. Lawrence University Libraries' holdings.

- Refine your search to include only sources found in the Reference Area and peruse encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs...that specifically cover American Culture. Identify topics that interest you.

- Use TAGS to refine your search.
Use a multi-disciplinary index such as Academic Search Complete to find journal articles on your SUBJECT.

Browse the titles and abstracts of articles written on your SUBJECT.

Similar to ENCORE Tags, subject headings on the left hand side of the screen tell you more specifically what these articles are about.
Follow the same process in Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com).

Turn your SUBJECT into a more specific TOPIC.
Choose an aspect of the broad SUBJECT that you're interested in exploring. TOPICS that are too narrow or too broad are difficult to research.
For example, after doing preliminary research you determine that your TOPIC will be GENDER ROLES IN AMERICAN CULTURE.

Identify keywords, specialized vocabulary, and synonyms for later research.
Keep track of terms for keyword searching. Determine how these need to be combined to find the best information. The computer doesn't "understand" synonyms or other relationships among words. Be sure to search all keywords that apply.
For example - Search:
AMERICA OR "UNITED STATES" AND GENDER OR "SEX ROLES" OR FEMINISM...

Research and read more about your TOPIC.
Use the keywords you've identified to find information on your TOPIC. Can you find enough information on the TOPIC, or do you need to modify it? (This is where the "iterative process" comes in).

Turn your TOPIC into a THESIS STATEMENT.
Formulate one or two sentences that state precisely what you will be informing your audience about. What will you prove or answer?
For example, after doing more in-depth research you determine that your THESIS STATEMENT will be - Despite advances achieved by the Women's Movement in the United States over the past one hundred years, there is still a considerable "gender gap" in America.