Soon or later it happens. The professor announces, "There will be no final exam." You smile. He adds, "Instead, prepare a 16-page paper—on a topic of your choosing." Your smile dissolves.

You sit, denied the modest rigor of an exam, asked instead to confront two of man's most intimidating achievements: language and libraries. On a topic of your choosing.

Choosing. Ever watch people in Baskin-Robbins 31 Flavors? First pacing in front of the cases, next urging their friends to choose ahead of them, finally in almost a panic blurting out a choice: "Jamoca Almond Fudge with—uh—Blueberry Cheesecake—no—Pistachio in a cone—doughcone."

Most people choose term paper topics the same way, in a panic with much changing of mind. The best way to choose flavors in Baskin-Robbins is to walk in confidently, rule out firmly the flavors you don't want, and then demand taste samples of the ones you think you do want. Taste before you choose. The same principle applies to term papers: rule out the areas you definitely don't want to write about and then read around in the areas you are interested in before choosing. Take time to find a topic you will like.

Limiting. When you feel you're getting close to a topic, think narrow—really narrow. Sixteen pages may sound like a lot but it's less than most Sports.

How To Write a Paper in 1,000 Easy Words