The composition of your topic paragraph is an important first step in successfully writing your research paper. There are two broad areas which will require careful attention:

I. Topic Selection

You may select a topic relevant to the historical material presented in Chapters 1-17 of the Stolba text (roughly from the Ancient Greeks through the end of the Baroque Period or about 1750). The key to selecting a successful topic is focusing your interest such that you will find sufficient resources to support your research, while at the same time not selecting a topic so broad that it is impossible to adequately cover it in a paper of 15-25 pages. For example, it would be difficult to cover a topic such as “Vocal Music of the Baroque” in a paper of 15-25 pages in anything more than a superficial way. However, it would be realistic to discuss a more focused topic within this broader area, such as “The Italian-style Sacred Vocal Works of Marc-Antoine Charpentier.”

Please feel free to ask me about possible topics. I will be pleased to offer advice on the appropriate scope of a topic, and I can help you focus your efforts and find resources for your research.

II. Clarity

Be sure that your topic paragraph accurately “maps out” the course of your paper, stating what you wish to discuss in the body of the paper. Remember that your outline will be the next assignment flowing from this topic paragraph, and that the topic paragraph should “point the way” to the outline, identifying the key areas your paper will cover. Avoid broad, grandiose, or unsubstantiated statements, such as “J.S. Bach was the best composer ever,” as these do not further the specific focus of your paper, nor are they appropriate to serious academic writing. Instead, focus on generalized statements that further the subject matter you wish to present in more detail in the body of your paper:

The Italian-style sacred vocal music of Marc-Antoine Charpentier may be readily linked to his studies with Carissimi at Rome, thus providing for the permeation of Italian musical influences at the royal court of France.

In short, give your reader some sense of what to expect in your paper, and attempt to “set up” the conclusions you hope to draw at the paper’s conclusion.
Grading

Grading of this and subsequent assignments will be according to a holistic scoring rubric. In the case of the topic paragraph, the following criteria will be employed:

**EXCELLENT (A / 18-20 points)** - a topic paragraph in this category

- Displays awareness of and a sense of purpose in communicating to an audience.
- Establishes a clearly focused controlling idea.
- Demonstrates coherent and rhetorically sophisticated organization: makes effective connections between ideas.
- Provides clear generalizations with specific detail.
- Displays superior, consistent control of syntax, sentence variety, word choice, and conventions of Standard English.

**STRONG (B / 16-17 points)** - a topic paragraph in this category

- Addresses audience needs and expectations.
- Establishes a clearly focused controlling idea.
- Demonstrates clear and coherent organization.
- Provides clear generalizations.
- Displays consistent control of syntax, sentence variety, word choice, and conventions of Standard English.

**ADEQUATE (C / 14-15 points)** - a topic paragraph in this category

- Addresses most audience needs and expectations.
- Establishes a controlling idea.
- Demonstrates adequate organization.
- Provides support for generalizations.
- Displays adequate control of syntax, sentence variety, word choice, and conventions of Standard English; errors do not slow the reader, impede understanding, or seriously undermine the authority of the writer.

**SERIOUSLY FLAWED (D / 12-13 points)** - a topic paragraph in this category

- Shows insufficient audience awareness.
- Strays from the controlling idea or the idea is unclear.
- Displays formulaic, random, or confusing organization.
- Lacks generalizations.
- Shows deficient control of syntax, word choice, and conventions of Standard English/ errors impede understanding.
FUNDAMENTALLY DEFICIENT (F / 11 points or lower) - a topic paragraph in this category

- Demonstrates a lack of audience awareness.
- Lacks a controlling idea.
- Lacks organization or organizes illogically.
- Displays inability to generalize.
- Shows inadequate control of syntax, word choice, and conventions of Standard English.