On Literature Topics & Research

What kinds of topics are good ones?
The best topics are ones that originate out of your own reading of a work of literature, but here are some common approaches to consider:

1. A discussion of a work's characters: are they realistic, symbolic, or historically-based?
2. A comparison/contrast of the choices different authors or characters make in a work
3. A reading of a work based on an outside philosophical perspective (Ex. how would a Freudian read Hamlet?)
4. A study of the sources or historical events that occasioned a particular work (Ex. comparing G.B. Shaw's Pygmalion with the original Greek myth of Pygmalion)
5. An analysis of a specific image occurring in several works (Ex. the use of moon imagery in certain plays, poems, novels)
6. A "deconstruction" of a particular work (Ex. unfolding an underlying racist worldview in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness)
7. A reading from a political perspective (Ex. how would a Marxist read William Blake's "London"?)
8. A study of the social, political, or economic context in which a work was written — how does the context influence the work?

How do I start a research?
Once you have decided on an interesting topic and work (or works), the best place to start is probably the Internet. Here you can usually find basic biographical data on authors, brief summaries of works, possibly some rudimentary analyses, and even bibliographies of sources related to your topic.
The library

The Internet, however, rarely offers serious direct scholarship; you will have to use sources found in the library, sources like journal articles and scholarly books, to get information that you can use to build your own scholarship—your literary paper. Consult the library's on-line catalog and the MLA Periodical Index. Avoid citing dictionary or encyclopedic sources in your final paper.

How do I use the information I find?

The secondary sources you find are only to be used as an aid. Your thoughts should make up most of the essay. As you develop your thesis, you will bring in the ideas of the scholars to back up what you have already said. For example, say you are arguing that Huck Finn is a hero; that's your basic thesis. You give evidence from the novel that allows this reading, and then, at the right place, you might say the following, a paraphrase:

According to Susan Thomas, Huck sacrifices himself because he wants to set Jim free (129).

If the scholar states an important idea in a memorable way, use a direct quote.

"Huck's altruism and feelings of compassion for Jim force him to surrender to the danger" (Thomas 129).

Either way, you will then link that idea to your thesis.