
Five Steps to Successful Research

The following steps outline a simple, yet effective strategy for identifying information required to complete your assignments. Research is not simply a series of mechanical activities that, once you have mastered them, will work in all situations. To be a truly competent researcher, you must be creative and flexible in your methods. If you can't find what you want in one place, you must know what your alternatives are and how to take advantage of them.

1) Define Your Topic

Be sure you understand what you are looking for **before** beginning your research.

Identify and develop ideas

- Identify the main theme
- Think of some issues related to this theme
- Select an issue that has potential for further development
- List sub-issues that may be explored

Generate research questions

- Develop questions to guide your search for information

Write a topic definition statement

- Include background information on the issue
- Summarize the purpose of your project and how you will accomplish it
- Indicate the primary question to be answered

Translate your topic into search terms

- Make a list of the key concepts or keywords
- Include synonyms, equivalent terms and variant spellings
- Look up keywords/phrases in an encyclopedia or other reference source to set the context for your research
- Add to your list of search terms as your search progresses

2) Determine the Kinds of Information Required

Precisely what information will you need in order to address

- A brief summary of an issue written for a general audience?
- An in-depth analysis or discussion from an academic point of view?
- Cutting edge, up-to-date information?
- Information from a Canadian perspective?
- Government reports or other publications?
- Opinion polls or surveys?
- Statistical information?
- A definition of terms?

Determine the resources that will help you find the information you need. It is often a good idea to use a variety of sources to obtain a broad view of your topic.

3) Determine Where You Will Find the Type of Information Required

Library Catalogue

Use the Library Catalogue to find:

- dictionaries, handbooks, and encyclopedias
- statistical information
- government and other reports
- general books on a topic
- videos

Periodical Indexes

Periodicals are collections of articles published on a regular basis or “periodically”. These include newspapers, popular magazines, and scholarly or academic journals. Periodical indexes lead you to articles on different topics. Use periodicals:

- for timely information on a current topic
- to focus attention on a specific issue or aspect of a topic

Web Resources

The Web is an excellent tool for finding information, but is usually not the best place to begin academic research. It can be a good source for:

- information about companies and organizations
- very current information

- government reports and other publications
- sampling a wide range of ideas
- locating information on topics not covered by mainstream publications
- finding quick facts or very specific information

4) Evaluate the Results of Your Research

Once you identify the sources that look interesting, it is important to evaluate the authority and quality of each one before using it. Ask yourself these questions:

- is the author a specialist in the fields?
- is the publisher well known and respected?
- is the usefulness of the information affected by time? If so, is it up-to-date?
- is the treatment of the topic general, technical, or scholarly? Does it matter?
- is there any indication of bias?

5) Cite Your Sources in a Standard Bibliographic Format

Format the citations in your bibliography using a widely accepted bibliographic style, such as the Chicago Style Guide, the Modern Language Association (MLA), or the American Psychological Association (APA) standards. Handouts on these and other styles are available at the Research Desk in the Library, or on the Library homepage (library.douglascollege.ca):

Online Style Guide for Chicago: guides.douglascollege.ca/Chicago

Online Style Guide for MLA: guides.douglascollege.ca/MLA7

Online Style Guide for APA: guides.douglascollege.ca/APA-6

Need help clarifying your topic?

Don't know where to look next?

Want to be sure that you have the most accurate and current information available?

Want to be confident that you are using a reference source effectively?

ASK A LIBRARIAN!
