LIBR 101: Library & Information Strategies

UNIT 6: GETTING STARTED WITH RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION
Do you know how the marathon (a long-distance running race) got its name? Or, have you ever wondered where you would find information on making wine? Or, where you should go on your next vacation? Or, whether UFOs really do exist? Whether you go to an encyclopedia or other reference book or you surf the Internet to find answers to these questions, you are doing research. Regardless of the objective, the research process consists of a systematic approach to finding information.

For the college student, research is an integral part of the learning process. Students are expected to prepare themselves for life by learning how to access information and how to use it efficiently and effectively. Naturally, many students have some apprehensions about doing research. The best way to conquer this anxiety is to learn how the research process works—how to organize and analyze your information need, how to locate and evaluate information, how to synthesize what is learned with original ideas and interpretations, and finally how to document your research. This chapter will introduce you to the steps involved in researching and writing a research paper. Later chapters will concentrate on developing skills for finding and evaluating information found in different types of resources.

8 Steps in Preparing a Research Paper
It is helpful to approach research as a series of steps.

Step 1: Choose your topic
Step 2: Find background information in reference sources
Step 3: REFINE your topic
Step 4: Find books on your topic
Step 5: Find current information on your topic
Step 6: Evaluate what you have found
Step 7: Write your paper
Step 8: Cite your sources

In this lesson, we will address steps 1-4 of the research process.

Step 1: Choose Your Topic

Think about what you’ve been talking and reading about in class. Pick a topic that interests you – after all, you’re going to have to spend a lot of time on this.

State your topic as a question. For example, if you are interested in researching capital punishment, you might pose the question: “Does the death penalty deter crime?” Or, you might focus on another aspect of capital punishment, such as: “Is the death penalty fairly administered in the U.S.?”

Think about different aspects of your topic and pick one that is not too narrow or too broad. If your topic is too broad, you may be overwhelmed by the amount of material you find. If your topic is
too narrow, you may be frustrated by the small amount of material that is available. Be flexible with your topic and realize that you might have to revise or change it even after you have started doing research.

Once you have chosen a topic, identify and write down the main concepts or keywords in your question. Try to think of synonyms and alternative terms.

**Step 2: Find Background Information in Reference Sources**

After you have chosen a topic, you may want to find some general background information on it. Background information can:

- Introduce you to a topic and provide an overview;
- Provide some of the terminology or jargon unique to the topic;
- Provide important names, dates, places, and people related to your topic;
- Lead you to other sources through the bibliography or “recommended reading” section.

Good places to look for background information include general reference sources we covered in the previous units. You can also search the online catalog for reference sources on your topic.

Once you have found a reference source, use the index to look up the concepts and keywords you identified in Step 1. Read the relevant entries. Be sure to look at the bibliography (references)! This can lead you to some of the best information on a topic.

**Textbooks, Class Notes and Reserve Readings**

Don’t forget these. Class readings can be great sources for background information.

**Step 3: REFINE Your Topic**

Once you have found some background information you can refine your broad research topic into a narrower, focused topic. The sooner you can develop a broad subject into a focused topic, the sooner you can shape your research into a final product.

**Narrowing a Topic**

A topic that covers too much material is a common problem for students. Depending on your interests, a general topic can be focused in many ways. If you are having trouble narrowing your topic, consider the following questions:

- What do you already know about the topic?
- Is there a specific time period you want to cover?
- Is there a geographic region or country on which you would like to focus?
- Is there a particular aspect of this topic that interests you? For example, public policy implications, historical influence, sociological aspects, psychological aspects, specific groups or individuals involved in the topic.

On the other hand, if your subject is too focused or detailed, you may have a hard time finding enough sources. In this case, you will need to broaden your topic.
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Broadening a Topic
Topics that are too narrow are fairly simple to fix. You can broaden the scope of your topic by:

- Lengthening time periods (example: use the sixties instead of 1968)
- Consider the broader issues (example: food safety instead of mad cow disease)
- Increasing specific geographic areas (example: use San Diego County instead of Oceanside)
- Altering the focus of the subject, or discipline (consider key persons, events, issues)

State Your Topic as a Question

By posing your topic as a question you can more narrowly define what aspect of the topic you want to write about or what position you want to take.

For example, if you are doing research about the use of alcoholic beverages by college students, you might pose the question:

“What effect does the use of alcoholic beverages have on the health of college students?”

It’s important to be flexible – you may have to narrow, broaden, or even change your topic as you move through the research process.

Identify the Main Concepts or Keywords in Your Question
At this stage, identify the main concepts or keywords in your question or thesis statement, and formulate your search query. The “query” is the translation of your research question or thesis statement into keywords or phrases that the index or database you search will understand.

Using the above assignment topic, the keywords are:

- alcoholic beverages
- health
- college students

Identify Synonyms and Alternate Keywords
Once you have identified the keywords in the question you formulated, you may want to check a dictionary or thesaurus, for synonyms and antonyms for these topic keywords, to develop a list of alternate words which you can use in your search. It may help to chart out the words you find.

Using the above assignment topic, we could use the following alternate keywords:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEYWORDS</th>
<th>ALTERNATE KEYWORDS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>alcoholic beverages</td>
<td>alcohol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>liquor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>drinking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>binge drinking</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health</td>
<td>illness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 4: Find Books on Your Topic

In Unit 3, you learned your way around the online library catalog. Recall that when you are looking for books on a topic, rather than for a specific book whose title or author you know, you use the EVERYTHING search option. When you find a book that is a good match, look at the subject terms assigned to the book. These appear in the catalog record and are usually in blue text.

Make sure you write down the title, the author’s name, the complete call number and the location for each book you want to find. Also, look at the material location to make sure the book is available.

Tips:

- If you don’t find many titles in your search, you might have to use broader search terms. Instead of “soft money,” try “campaign finance,” for example.

- Books are arranged by subject, using Library of Congress call numbers. This means that when you find one good book, others may be near it on the shelf. BROWSE the books near the one you’re looking for. You may find something even better!

- Check the bibliographies in the books you find for leads to other sources.
UNIT 6: ASSIGNMENT
Name:_______________________________________

Date: ____________________ Instructor:_________________________

Suppose you are asked to submit an 8-page research paper for a class. Select a topic from the list below or use your own topic.

- Nuclear Power
- Censorship
- Eating disorders
- Suffrage
- Mayan Civilization
- United Nations
- Child Labor
- Asperger Syndrome
- Hieroglyphics

1. What is your topic?_____________________________________________________________

2. What is the title of the reference source you consulted?____________________________

3. How did you find this reference source? _________________________________________

4. What keywords or terms might you use to find information on this topic? (list at least three)
   a. ___________________________________________
   b. ___________________________________________
   c. ___________________________________________
   d. ___________________________________________

5. List a question or statement you could make about your topic based on what you’ve learned about the subject.
   ____________________________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________________________

6. Use the Library Catalog to locate a book on your topic. (Remember, you may need to use more general or alternate keywords when searching.) The book can be in print or electronic (e-book) format.

   What is the title of the book? _________________________________________________
   What is the call number for the book? _________________________________________