Topic Formulation and Preliminary Research

Be sure you understand the parameters of the assignment. If you need to, discuss your topic ideas with your professor in the early stages, then later after preliminary research, with a reference librarian.

Work from the general to the specific

- Get a grasp on a topic using the library’s online encyclopedia sources, such as: Access Science, Credo Reference, Encyclopedia Britannia, Gale Virtual Reference Library, and Opposing Viewpoints. Also look for specialized print encyclopedias that cover the subject area or discipline of your topic, such as Encyclopaedia Judaica, Encyclopedia of Sociology, Encyclopedia of Education, Dictionary of Art, Encyclopedia of Molecular Cell Biology and Molecular Medicine, and many more.
- As you read through encyclopedia articles for context, gather pertinent terminology, major persons, dates, and any other concepts that will help later, in your search for books and research articles.
- Note any useful sources listed in the bibliography at the end of the encyclopedia article (books, journals, magazines, etc.). The sources cited in the bibliography are good starting points for further research.

Once you have determined a main topic:

- State your topic idea as a question. For example, if you are interested in finding out 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 success of college students?"
- Identify the main concepts or keywords in your question. In this case they are: “alcoholic beverages”, “success,” and “college students”.

Test your topic

- Test the main concepts or keywords in your topic using them as keyword search terms in the library’s catalog for books, and in databases for articles.
- If you are finding too much information and too many sources, narrow your topic.
- If you are finding too little information, broaden your topic. For example, look for information on students, rather than college students. Expand your search by adding synonymous search terms using OR: alcoholic beverages OR beer OR wine OR liquor. Using truncation (*) with search terms also broadens the search and increases the number of items you find, such as: alcohol* -which would find alcohol, alcoholic, and alcoholism).

Translate your search terms into the language of the discipline and the catalog and databases you use

- Check the subject headings listed in the subject field of the online record for these books and articles, or in the thesaurus in the article database. Then do subject (instead of keyword) searches using those subject headings to locate additional titles. For example, a subject term search in a database for “success” may point to “academic achievement” as a narrower (and more appropriate) term for the above topic.
- Remember that many of the books and articles you find will themselves have bibliographies. Check these bibliographies for additional useful resources for your research.

Record what you find and where you find it

- Record the complete citation (including URL, DOI, and/or name of the database) for each source you find.
- Better yet, use a citation tool such as RefWorks to manage your citations, store full-text articles, and create your bibliographies.

Adapted from: Cornell’s Olin & Uris Libraries http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/suggtop.html