**Research help**

1. **Choose a Topic**

Choosing a topic does not seem like it should be difficult. Unfortunately, it often is.

Choosing a right topic can often make the entire process much easier. This can be done if you follow these steps.

1. **Pick a topic that interests you.**

The topics we can choose are often dictated by assignments, classes, professors, etc. But, find a topic you like will make the process more rewarding.

If you have an open-ended assignment, browsing the databases listed below can help you decide on a topic by giving you a jumping off point. They also have the added benefit of suggesting many different resources once your topic is found:

* [*CQ Researcher*](http://libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PSU00619)  
  This database publishes reports that provide overviewed, background information, opinion pieces, and lots of references for a large collection of topics. A really great place to start, if you aren’t certain what’s out there.
* [*Opposing Viewpoints in Context*](http://libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PSU00860)  
  Much like CQ Researcher, this database provides overviews, media, background information, and lots of references on specific topics that are known to be in the public eye. A great place to browse for topics, or to find out more about one you’re considering.
* [*Google News*](https://news.google.com/) *or* [*Yahoo News*](https://www.yahoo.com/news/) *– specific topics*  
  Google or Yahoo news can show you topics that are currently being discussed. It can be a good place to start.

1. **Find information on your topic.**

You may find a topic like "Obesity" or "Fracking" interesting enough to write about, but not know very much beyond what you've noticed in the news.

That's okay! Even for subjects that you feel that you know a lot about, it's hugely beneficial to get background information. That's where **encyclopedias** and other **reference materials** come in. You can use them to discover definitions, general trends, subtopics, and other items of interest about the subject you are interested in. Once this information is gathered, you can use it conduct more effective research.

**Wikipedia**

Didn't think you'd see this here, did you?

Wikipedia is a really good example of a reference source: a place you go when you want to see what something is. Just like many other encyclopedias, it can give you a basic overview, related topics, and even a brief history of your subject. However, because pages can be edited by anyone (your mom, your little brother, your nosy neighbor down the street), there’s a risk that someone has messed around with the information and it’s completely **wrong**. On top of that, you can’t cite it. So feel free to use it, but make sure you use it wisely.

* [*Gale Virtual Reference Library*](http://libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PSU01417) *(GVR)*  
  Imagine this as Wikipedia’s older, more reliable sibling, the one you can count on to not exaggerate or just plain lie. It works the same way, but people who have definitely done their research are the ones writing the entries. What’s more, unlike Wikipedia, most instructors will allow materials from GVR to be cited in your assignment. Information isn’t worth very much if you can’t use it!
* [*Oxford Reference Online*](http://libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PSU00541)*, and* [*Sage Reference Online*](http://libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PSU01699)  
  Just like the GVR, but from different publishers.

Now that you’ve done your background research, your topic should be shaping itself more clearly to you. It can help at this point to create a concept or mind map that demonstrates the interconnected aspects of the topic and how they relate to each other.

It’s now that you need to take the aspects of the topic that are of most interest to you, and form them into a question that your research assignment will answer. This question will guide your research forward, helping you to stay focused and relevant.

**4. Create a research question.**

When the time comes to do the bulk of your research, three different things can happen with your results.

It’s not pleasant to be on the verge of writing a paper or script, only to find that your topic is too new, obscure, narrow, or broad to find enough supporting research to complete. So it’s important to try it out, and to change your topic, if you find yourself with too many, too few, or irrelevant results.

Some good general tools to try a preliminary search in are:

* *Ebsco*
* ACM Digital Library
* Cambridge University Press Journals (Full Collection)
* E-Journals (see more details on the IT Library website)
* InCites
* MathSciNet
* [*Academic Search Complete*](http://libraries.psu.edu/eresources/PSU01655)  
  Comprehensive scholarly, multi-disciplinary full-text database, with more than 5,300 full-text periodicals - in other words, lots of great stuff!
* ProQuest Central
* Taylor & Francis Online
* e-books (see more details the IT Library website)
* Wiley Online Library

**5. Do a test search on your topic.**

It’s now that you need to take the aspects of the topic that are of most interest to you, and form them into a question that your research assignment will answer. This question will guide your research forward, helping you to stay focused and relevant.