Research: Getting Started

The more interested you are in your topic, the more motivated and enthusiastic you will be to research and understand its complexities.

- Is there a controversial topic you have always wanted to learn about?
- Is there an issue that has touched you, your family or your community?
- Is there a problem in the world that you want to understand more fully?

1. Develop a working knowledge of your topic in order to frame an effective research question.

You have a working knowledge when you can talk about it for one minute without repeating yourself. How do you develop a quick working knowledge of your topic? Investigate authoritative reference sources or databases to identify and read a good overview article. This is one of the best ways to acquire a working knowledge of a topic. **Become familiar with the vocabulary used related to your topic.**


What do you know about a topic, and what do you need to explore further? Ask yourself these kinds of questions when thinking about a topic to help develop a good research question. **An investigation of a topic is not research until you have focused it around a solid question or thesis statement that addresses a specific problem to be solved or an issue to be addressed.**

3. To develop an effective research question, NARROW your topic to one aspect or specific focus.

Avoid questions that can be answered with a yes, no, or one word answer. Avoid broad survey questions that simply re-describe what has already been described. Based on your findings, you may need to refine your research question. **Research is NOT merely the gathering of information but the use of information to solve a problem or address a specific issue.** For example, instead of looking at the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., analyze why his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” was so important. **Example question: What impact did Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” have on the American civil rights movement?**

Using words like what, why and how in your research question helps to construct an effective question to focus your research. Once you have a research question, identify the essential keywords in the question to begin the search process. Revise your search using the vocabulary of your topic and do several searches.

4. Research is a process of inquiry and strategic exploration. Think of research as organized curiosity. Keep asking questions and be prepared to do many different searches. Explore several databases.

Approach research as an open-ended exploration and engagement with information. Tap into your intellectual curiosity, ask questions and be flexible. Ambiguity can help the research process. What is the dialogue or debate surrounding your topic? What is the vocabulary used in the conversations surrounding your chosen topic? Realize that information sources vary in content, format and relevance to your needs, depending on the nature of your search and the scope of your topic. Apply the evaluative criteria of authority, currency, accuracy, purpose, bias, and relevance to the information sources you find. Select and use sources that are highly relevant to effectively answer your research question.
Worksheet: Develop a Research Question and Search Strategies

Databases (to find magazine and journal articles) cannot think or answer your research question. It’s up to you to search these tools in a way that yields relevant information sources that provide answers to your research question. Even with a good search, not all results will be useful. It is your responsibility to evaluate the results to determine what is relevant to your question. Keywords matter! When you change your keyword search terms, you change your results. Effective researchers learn the vocabulary used for the topic they are researching and perform several searches to identify the best sources of information to answer a research question.

Follow steps below to develop a research question and identify key search terms.

**STEP 1:** Develop a working knowledge of your topic to begin. Think about Who? What? Where? When? Why? How? What specifically do you need or want to know? Instead of broad survey questions, narrow your focus to one aspect. If you are reading an article, what are the main ideas that can help you develop a research question that addresses a problem or issue? Do not ask a question that can be answered with a yes or no. Start with words like What? Why? and How? are helpful. Use words that focus the topic, for example: Benefits? Effects? Causes? Prevention? Consequences? Risk factors? Strategies?

*Example:* What are some strategies nurses can use to prevent stress on the job?

Come up with your own research question below. Think of something you are interested in and use what/why/ or how.

**STEP 2:** Cross out the clutter words and insignificant words that appear in your research question. Less is more. Leave the words you think are essential and must appear in each and every article in your search results.

*Example:* What are some strategies **nurses** can use to prevent **stress** on the job?

**STEP 3:** Underline the words that remain; these are your starting keyword concepts. Remember, keywords matter. Change your keywords = change your results. Always perform more than one search and evaluate your search results.

**STEP 4:** Put an "AND" between the concepts.  
*Example:* nurses and stress

**STEP 5:** The first set of keywords you use in a search may not yield good results. If that’s the case, experiment using synonyms.  
*Example:* nurses and burnout

Construct two different keyword search statements in the box below to begin the research process.

*Keyword Search Example 1:* nurses and stress  
*Keyword Search Example 2:* nurses and burnout