

## Keywords and Search Tactics

With so many resources at your disposal, you might feel overwhelmed as you start to search for information about your chosen topic. One of the first steps in your investigation will be to plug keywords into an Internet search engine. Keyword searching is one of many strategies you can use to ensure that you are not wasting your time wading through resources that you cannot use in your analysis.

### Keyword Searching

This type of searching is the one that you are probably most familiar with, since it uses "natural language." When you enter a phrase into Google or a similar search engine, you are using natural language. Keywords are used to search through content to find certain themes and ideas.

When searching for your topic, try out different combinations of words and phrases. Don't worry if your initial search yields irrelevant, too many, or too few results. Try multiple keywords, different combinations, and synonyms.

For example, if you are looking for information about minors in the justice system you may start out with keywords like: minors, juvenile offenders, youth, crime, incarceration, underage sentencing, juvenile detention, etc.

### Subject Searching

Subject searching allows you to search by categories within a database or online catalog. Subject terms are predefined within a database. You can usually find the subjects of an article or periodical under the "info" tab.

This method of searching is useful after you have found a useful resource on your topic and find which subject search terms are associated with that resource. Subject searching allows you to broadly search for sources on a topic. Since subjects are assigned to articles within a specific database, results will vary from one database to another.

For example, you may have found the article, "No longer a child: juvenile incarceration in America." by Charlyn Bohland, published in the *Capital University Law Review*. From this article, you determine that "juvenile incarceration" is a subject that could return more articles on the topic.

### Boolean Searching

Boolean searching uses Boolean operators to search with more precision. The most common Boolean operators are **AND**, **OR**, and **NOT**. These words help search engines broaden or narrow search results.

**AND:** Tells the search engine that you want to find information about two or more search terms. The search engine will only bring back results that include both or all of your search terms. For example, you could search *minors AND crime*.

**OR:** Tells the search engine that you want information about either of the search terms you entered. Using OR will broaden your search results because the search engine will return any results that have either (or any) of your search terms in them. For example, you could search *juvenile detention OR youth detention*.

**NOT:** Tells the search engine that you want to find information about the search term but not the second one. This method will narrow your search. For example, you could search *youth incarceration* NOT *adult incarceration*.

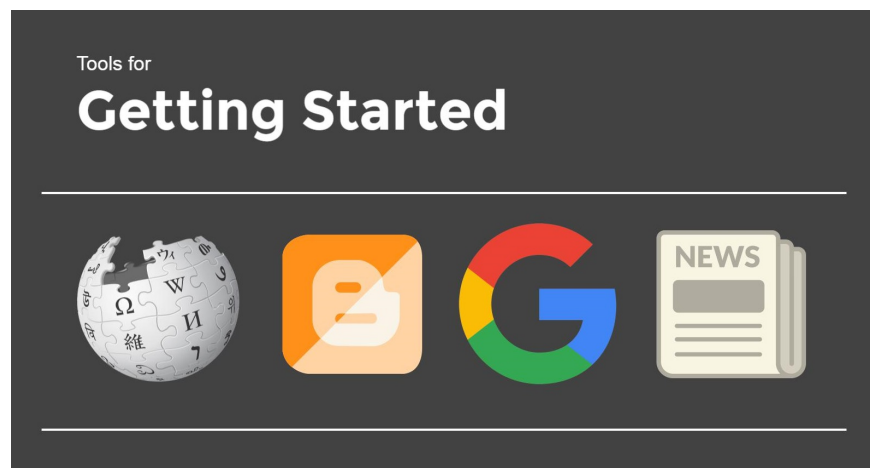
Using Boolean operators helps make connections between keywords when you are searching to yield more specific results. This is a good method to use in conjunction with keyword searching.

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## Searching Broadly

Many people find that when researching a complex issue, starting with the big picture goes a long way. Searching broadly helps you gain an understanding of the general area of the social sciences around your issue. It can unearth valuable terminology and professional opinions and provide a bird's-eye-view of the topic.

When searching broadly, read what comes up. Don't concern yourself with *only* finding credible, academic resources. Below we detail a few online resources that are very helpful for performing broad background searches.



## Internet Search Engines

This may seem obvious, but the first step of the research process can and should be to simply search it on any Internet search engine. A few key terms related to your social science issue may lead you to some interesting information. What do you find?

A search like this can answer basic background questions, such as:

- "How relevant is this issue? Are people talking about the issue now in mainstream culture, or is the conversation purely in the academic realm?"
- "What are people saying about this issue?"
- "What organizations or people are reporting on this issue?"
- "How much information is available on the topic?"

## News Organizations and Aggregators

Online periodicals are a fantastic resource for finding current events related to your social science issue. These include more traditional news sources, such as *The New York Times*, *CNN*, or *NPR*, and can also include pop culture news aggregators, such as *The Huffington Post* or *Vox*. Often, these sites report the latest research, legislation, opinions, or developments in straightforward language. (Go check out the Opinion section of *The New York Times* to get an idea; it's chock full of social science issues!)

While some of these news aggregators are credible, others are not. Some news aggregators post research that has been taken out of context. Most commonly, you'll find an article that has a bold headline designed to catch your interest; however, when you click on the article, the research behind the claims is not definitive or not cited. We will discuss which sites can be considered credible in the next learning block.

## Wikipedia

Wikipedia is a great resource to find fast information about a social science issue. You can use this online, crowd-sourced encyclopedia to gain background information and find important names, dates, theories, and terms that can help your understanding of the issue.

However, you cannot cite Wikipedia as a source for the information you find; you must always trace the information back to its original source. The good news is that much of the information found within Wikipedia has clickable citations that will take you to original sources for further investigation — but always make sure you validate that the source contains the information!

## Blogs

You may be able to find blog articles related to your topic. Some organizations post informative blog articles to generate brand recognition and credibility. Others attempt to channel users to their websites. Individuals, especially professionals in the field, may post blog articles presenting research and opinions in an effort to build their own personal brand.

Blog articles can be very helpful if they are well-researched and cited; however, they should be assessed for reliability and credibility. We will discuss the criteria for determining whether a resource is credible or not in the next learning block.

## Mark's Social Media Study

Over the past year, Mark and his wife have been puzzled by their teenage daughter Julia's online behavior.

One day, Mark overhears Julia on the phone with her friend Liz. While discussing a photo that Julia has posted on her social media account, the two girls conclude that the photo should be deleted immediately. When she hangs up, Mark asks Julia which photo she deleted. She shows him a shot of a pumpkin patch dotted with people on their crisp, Saturday afternoon family outing. It's actually quite a

good photo. Mark asks her why she wants to take it down, and Julia responds sadly that it has not received enough "likes."

A week later, Liz and Julia are studying over snacks in the kitchen. Mark overhears the two girls speak in disgusted tones about their classmates. One has "a perfect life" according to Julia. Liz describes another as "gorgeous," and yet another is "so tan."

The following Sunday, while watching the football game, Julia suggests that she and her dad take a "selfie." Mark leans over the couch and smiles. Julia doesn't like that photo, so they take it again. And again. They take about eight photos before Mark finally leans back in his chair, exasperated. An hour later, Julia flashes her screen at him to show him all the "likes" they received.

Mark's wife is slightly concerned over all the time and attention that Julia pays to her phone. She notes to Mark, privately, the apparent anxiety that Julia displays over these accounts, especially when no one "likes" her posts.

As a father, Mark is also concerned; but as a social scientist, he's intrigued by her behavior. He's a professor of media studies at a state university, but his area of expertise is the history of television and radio; he's less familiar with some of the newer social media apps that his students and children use so frequently. His department is looking for a new research project, and Mark believes he might have stumbled upon it.

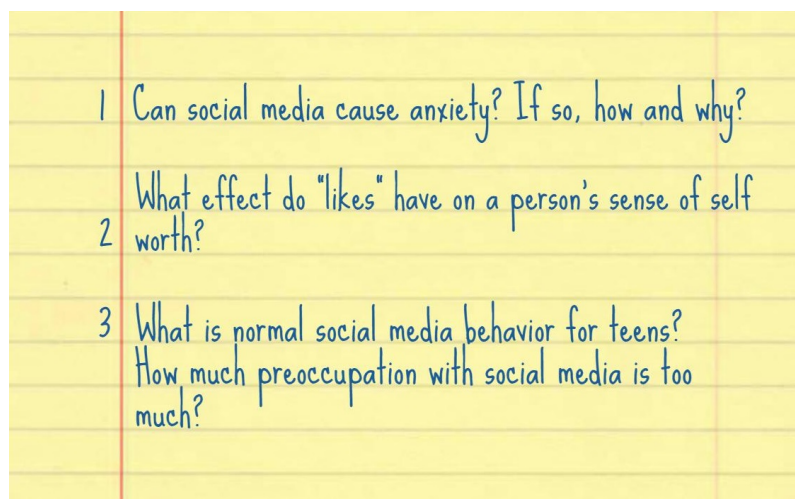
While his wife suggests that they remove or restrict Julia's access to her phone, Mark is hesitant to jump to conclusions until he understands the situation better. He decides to spend some time each night researching the topic, and he considers bringing the findings to his department chair at the end of the month.

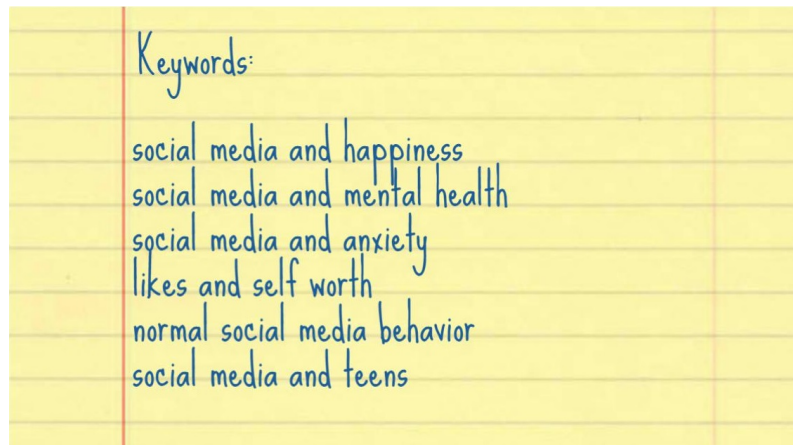
After he and his wife discuss all the situations that have "raised the alarm" in their minds, they pinpoint a social science issue that he will investigate further: the relationship between social media and happiness.

## Mark's Investigation

Mark has become concerned over his daughter Julia's strange social media habits and growing anxiety. His focus is now on investigating **the relationship between social media and happiness**.

He writes down a few questions that he and his wife have asked each other on the topic and then starts typing keywords into Google.





The results overwhelm him. Article after article appears, each summarizing scholarly findings and relating anecdotes of teen social media users. Many of his keywords bring him to the same data.

In an effort not to "fall down the rabbit hole" of the Internet, Mark resolves to click on only the most relevant links that are returned by his search terms. Because so many links are generated by his search, he collects only two for each set of keywords.

## Using Keywords

Mark's keyword search produced a sizable list of resources that he could use to research the topic of **social media and happiness**. He spends some time reading these in more depth.

### SAMPLE KEYWORDS:

- **social media and happiness**

Mark finds a blog article from *Anti Social Media Week*, described as "a five-day exploration of the relationship between technology and happiness." "The Science of Happiness on Social Media" references a study in which Facebook altered the news feeds of many people to show happy or sad news posts to see if it would affect the people viewing their feeds. They found that the emotional tone of the posts online do influence the moods of people viewing them. Mark is stunned.

- **social media and mental health**

Mark clicks on another article entitled "10 Ways Social Media Affects Our Mental Health", published on the Degreed.com blog. The article links to a number of studies that have demonstrated that social media can be addictive, can foster a need for comparison to others, is linked to restlessness, can promote cyber-bullying, and can glamorize drug and alcohol use, among a few others.

He also finds an article entitled "Social Media Is Harming the Mental Health of Teenagers. The State Has to Act" on *The Guardian*. In addition to noting that social media use has been linked to anxiety and depression, the article states that it may inhibit teens' ability to get the appropriate amount of sleep. The article also references a survey

that has found that girls seek social and emotional support online rather than from their parents.

- **social media and anxiety**

This search brings Mark to a *Huffington Post* article entitled "The Very Real Anxiety That Comes From Texting, 'Likes' And FOMO," which claims that (as stated in the title) texting, getting "likes," and FOMO (fear of missing out), can cause anxiety. Mark notes that the site does not reference any academic research.

Another article published on PsychCentral.com, "The Anxiety of Facebook," reiterates that social media networking has been linked to increased levels of anxiety and depression. Image crafting to near obsession, it states, can take a toll on self-esteem. The article further notes that social media may increase the anxiety associated with meeting new people in person for the first time.

Yet another article, called "FOMO Is a Real Thing, and It's Adversely Affecting Teens on Social Media," on digitaltrends.com underscores the findings that frequent social media use can cause poor sleep (especially if logging in at night), promote anxiety and depression, and lower self-esteem. The article notes increased pressure to be logged in all the time and respond to others' posts and comments.

- **likes and self worth**

These search terms give Mark some interesting data. The article "The Relationship Between Social Media and Self-Worth" on a social media blog *The Social* references reports of social media users that said they felt worse after comparing themselves to others online. However, the article cites a study that shows that receiving likes is correlated to a boost in self-esteem. Of particular interest to Mark is this quote:

- "Would a social network without a feedback mechanism still be a social network?...Would such a network fail? I have no idea. On one side, why would anyone share information with others if there's no way for you to know what anyone thinks? And on the other side, this network would be free of all of those "look at me being a spoiled brat" posts, because come on, the only reason people do that is to fish for likes. Regardless, the value of social media is so because it facilitates two-way communication between you and a larger audience than you would otherwise not have physical access to."

- **normal social media behavior**

Using these keywords, Mark finds an article on *Psychology Today* entitled "Do Facebook and Other Social Media Encourage Narcissism?" The author examined research showing that people who use social media the most tend to have insecure and narcissistic personalities.

Mark finds a parenting advice website that gives guidelines for normal online behavior and recommendations for how to curb "too much" social media use. He isn't sure whether the site is academic or not, and Mark mentally notes that if he uses this data he will have to chase down the author's credentials.

- **social media and teens**

These new search terms provide a CNN article called "Why Some 13-Year-Olds Check Social Media 100 Times a Day," summarizing the results from a CNN study of teens on

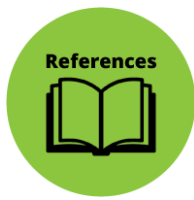
social media. The study shows a correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and the amount of anxiety a teen exhibited.

After reading many of the articles and websites his search uncovered, Mark notices that the *way that people use social media* can influence their happiness. He re-visits his original list of questions surrounding the topic and jots down some things he wishes to continue researching:

- the patterns in posting behavior among groups of connections
- the total amount of time spent on social media
- the time of day that a person is on social media
- the number of times that a person checks social media
- the intention a person has while surfing the Internet (what they are looking for/at)
- image crafting — the way a person crafts his or her "persona" online

Mark is now able to narrow his focus on this idea of **how social media habits influence an individual's mental and emotional state**.

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Williams, R. (2013). "Do Facebook and other social media encourage narcissism?" *Psychology Today*, Retrieved from [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com)



## Searching for Credible Sources

Many credible sources are academic sources (also known as scholarly sources). Academic sources are books, articles, periodicals, websites, and reference materials that are written for the purpose of supporting and advancing scholarly research rather than general interest in a topic. Academic sources address a narrow topic written by experts in the field and aim to inform readers about the most up-to-date research and news related to the topic.

An important factor in whether a source can be considered scholarly or not is the peer review process. Usually, before a journal prints an article submitted by an expert in the field, it will send the article to several other experts for review. In their review, the other experts will help the original author by prompting the author to answer any questions the author initially left unanswered, and they will question any data that seems too good to be true or contrary to generally held expert opinion. The original author will then revise with this criticism in mind. As a result, what gets published will have been read by several experts.

Academic presses and other organizations also use the peer review process, so books from academic presses can be scholarly as well. If you use peer-reviewed sources, you can rest assured that some of the critique-work has been done for you. However, you still need to use your own judgment to determine the credibility of sources.

The following graphic identifies some ways that you can tell whether a work is scholarly or not:

Scholarly sources (academic)	Non-scholarly sources (trade)
Are non-fiction (they contain facts and research on a topic)	Can be fiction (not based on fact), non-fiction, or satire
Usually list author credentials (Ph.D., M.D., Ed.S., J.D.)	Usually do not list author credentials; author experience may be emphasized
Usually have footnotes or use citations to indicate what ideas should be attributed to other authors and where the reader can find more information about the topic	Usually have few or no footnotes or citations
Usually present new research or new ideas about older research	Usually summarize research on a topic but don't produce any new ideas
Usually printed by university presses or in scholarly journals	May or may not be printed by university presses or in scholarly journals



## Locating Academic Sources

There are several digital libraries and organizations that you can use to help you locate academic sources.



## Professional organizations within the social sciences

The websites of the organizations pertaining to the social sciences contain information, reports, resources, and guides.

- The American Psychological Association
- The American Sociological Association
- The American Anthropological Association
- The Association for Psychological Science
- Social Science Research Council

## JSTOR

JSTOR: JSTOR stands for "journal storage" and contains many academic periodicals. JSTOR can be accessed via the Shapiro Library.

## **Open Society Foundations**

Open Society Foundations: Open Society Foundations (OSF) is an international grant making network whose website highlights current issues in education and youth, governance and accountability, health, media and information, and rights and justice.

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- The American Anthropological Association
- The Association for Psychological Science
- Social Science Research Council

## **United States Census Bureau**

The United States Census Bureau: The U.S. Census Bureau also offers information on a diverse number of topics within the U.S., such as homelessness, income inequality, and education, to name a few.

## **SNHU Shapiro Library**

SNHU Shapiro Library: At the heart of your search for academic resources should be the SNHU Shapiro Library. As a SNHU student, the library affords you access to thousands of publications, journals, and scholarly resources. In addition, Shapiro's services include research assistance if you get stuck.

## **Google Scholar**

Google Scholar: This is a free search engine that allows you to search across a wide range of academic literature. This tool might not allow you to access the full text version of the resource; however, you can use Google Scholar to generate titles of scholarly articles and then use the Shapiro Library to access them.

While Google searches the entire Internet, Google Scholar searches only academic literature.

## **Science Daily**

Science Daily: Science Daily is a news website that features articles on a wide range of science topics.

Furthermore, there are many **professional organizations related to your social science issue**. These are too numerous to mention. Most of the issues listed in Theme: Exploring Social Science Issues have one or more professional organizations that provide information, resources, or research on these topics. For example, if Mark were to research regulation of the Internet, he might come across the Federal Communications Bureau, or the FCC.

Finally, you may find some sources that are credible and may be appropriate to use in your research but that are not technically academic, like articles you find in newspapers or trade magazines. Such credible sources will have many of the characteristics that were introduced above — they may be produced by a reliable source, current, non-fiction, and contain information to support claims made within the piece — however, they may not be peer reviewed or published in a scholarly journal.

## Mark Continues His Search

In the previous learning block, Mark narrowed his social science topic from **social media and happiness** to the more specific topic of **how social media habits affect one's mental and emotional health**.

While he has already come up with an initial list of sources related to his topic, now he must target his search so that he is only looking at credible sources.

Mark starts by typing "social media and mental health" into Google Scholar, and he is overwhelmed by the results. Those keywords bring up over two million results! He realizes he needs to be more specific with his search terms. Since he is mostly interested in how social media habits affect teenagers like his daughter, he types the following:

**Search term:** "social media and adolescence"

Again, Mark is overwhelmed by the over 500,000 results that pop up. He decides to narrow his search even further.

**Search term:** "social media use and anxiety and depression in adolescence"

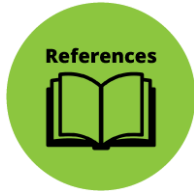
One of the results of this search is the article "Is Social Media Use Related to Sleep Quality, Self-Esteem, Anxiety and Depression in Adolescence?" This study confirms Mark's belief that high levels of social media use, and nighttime use, contribute to poorer sleep quality, low self-esteem, and high levels of anxiety and depression in teens.

Mark finds a host of additional articles in Google Scholar that pique his interest, and he also plugs his search terms into the websites for The American Psychological Association and The Association for Psychological Science. Those two sites also provide many interesting articles on the topic.

Mark is reminded of the CNN.com article that he encountered during his preliminary Google search. He goes back over his notes and re-reads the article "Why Some 13-Year-Olds Check Social Media

100 Times a Day." Inside the article he also discovers a link to an academic study titled "#Being Thirteen: Social Media and the Hidden World of Young Adolescents' Peer Culture." Mark believes that this study can be considered a credible and scholarly source since its authors are academics in the field, but he will further investigate it in the next learning block.

Both the CNN article and the related study could be credible sources that provide tons of interesting information for Mark. He bookmarks the pages so that he can easily reference them as he continues his research.



Haddad, C. (2015). "Why some 13-year-olds check social media 100 times a day." CNN.com Retrieved from cnn.com

Woods H. & Scott H. (2015) "Is social media use related to sleep quality, self-esteem, anxiety and depression in adolescence?" Presented at British Psychological Society Developmental Section and Social Section Annual Conference, Manchester, UK, 9-11 September 2015.

## Evaluating a Source

Now that you have at least three promising sources, it is time to take a closer look at these articles and studies to confirm that they are truly credible sources that are appropriate for use in an academic research project. A key tenet of the social sciences is the use of credible sources. Social scientists do not accept opinions or assertions presented to them without valid, scientific research to back these claims. For exactly this reason, they know the importance of supporting their own research with credible resources.

When evaluating sources, you should keep the following things in mind. You can remember these criteria with the acronym C.R.A.A.P.O.

### Currency

*The information in your source should be current enough for your research.*

#### Ask these questions:

- When was this source published?
- If the source is a website, does it list the date that it was last updated?
- How current do your sources need to be for Project One? If you are unsure, check with your instructor.

**Look for:** the date of publication of a print or database source; the date last updated on a website (usually at the bottom of the page) or the date of publication on a blog

**Avoid:** sources that include out-of-date information and websites that do not have a "last updated date."

### Relevancy

*When scrutinizing the relevancy of a source, you should consider if it answers your question or contributes to your research.*

#### Ask these questions:

- Does the source provide a general overview of your topic or does it focus on a specific aspect of your topic?
- Who is the intended audience for the source?
- Does the source assume you have prior knowledge about your topic?
- How many sources have you found so far? Have you searched thoroughly enough to find relevant sources?

**Look for:** the abstract or summary of an article, the subject and search terms associated with the source, and scan the full text of the source

**Avoid:** sources that include content that is too narrow or too broad for your research

## Accuracy

*Correct information is necessary in any scholarly source.*

### Ask these questions:

- Has the source been peer-reviewed?
- Has the author supplied a list of references, and does that list include scholarly sources?
- Is the source logical, organized, professional in appearance, and free of spelling and grammatical errors?

**Look for:** the author's reference list, information about the publisher or the journal, and the full text of the source for errors and organization

**Avoid:** sources that do not have a reference list, sources with grammatical errors, and sources that have not gone through an editorial process or peer review

## Authoritativeness

*Consider the author's level of expertise on the topic.*

### Ask these questions:

- Who is the author?
- What are the author's credentials? Is he or she an expert on the topic?
- Is the source published or sponsored by a reputable organization?

**Look for:** the author's credentials and affiliation, other sources written by the author, and the publisher's credentials

**Avoid:** sources from authors who have no credentials or expertise

## Purpose & Objectivity

*It's alright to use sources that contain strong arguments or opinions, but it is necessary to acknowledge the author's biases.*

### Ask these questions:

- If the author is arguing for or against something, what point of view does he or she represent?
- Does the source contain mostly factual information or is it based on opinions?
- Who published this piece? Is it associated with an organization that is known for promoting a certain point of view?

**Look for:** the abstract, summary, or table of contents (if available), scan the full text of the source, the author's and publisher's affiliations and other works

**Avoid:** sources that include few facts and statistics, are primarily opinion-based (though these can have a place in research), or are from an organization known for promoting certain viewpoints, sources that are seeking to sell a product or reap some kind of financial gain

## Incorporating Instructor Feedback

At the end of Theme: Exploring Social Science Issues, you submitted your Project One responses for a Progress Check. Has your instructor returned comments on this work yet? If so, take the time now to incorporate those comments, edits, and revisions into your **Project One** document. If not, do this immediately upon receiving his or her thoughts.

## Mark Reflects on His Search for Sources

Mark is now convinced that this issue will make an excellent next research project for his department; however, he still needs to formulate a specific research question that his team will attempt to answer. This will affect their study design, the length of the study, and the budget needed to perform the research, so he needs to be specific.

While Mark and his wife discuss this over their morning cup of coffee, the conversation turns to their first observations about Julia's online behavior. Mark's wife is surprised at the winding path his research has taken. A simple question (What is the relationship between social media and happiness?) has led Mark to investigate so many other topics of concern. He has had to consider things like the amount of time people spend on social media, the specific types of social media applications that people use, and how teenagers specifically use social media.

Mark reflects on his own social media habits. Does his morning ritual of scrolling through his Facebook feed influence his daily mood? The two of them discuss the discovery that some of these social media sites are able to use their personal information for commercial purposes; Mark is bothered by this fact, while his wife is not. They wonder together, as they do every morning, if they should be doing more to exert more parental control over their daughter's social media use.

Mark has found that even just looking around for information on a topic can make one question his or her own behaviors and opinions. He is excited to continue his research on this issue and learn more about himself along the way.

## Prior Research and Applications

At this point, Mark has narrowed his focus on the social media research project he has started. After a lot of research and reflection, he has decided to focus on investigating the effects of social media habits on well-being.

Mark is struck by the idea that this research might have some really interesting applications. For example, if it is true that a person's social media habits can influence their well-being, then an educational campaign targeting teenagers might be worthwhile. Mark also wonders if any technology companies have ever created applications that would help people limit how much time they spend logged in to social media platforms. For example, Mark thinks that maybe an app that sent a daily summary of any notifications a user got on Facebook — instead of getting those notifications in real time throughout the day — might help people spend less time online.

Mark decides to spend some time researching existing campaigns or applications with the goal of limiting social media use. His search yields a few applications available for download that either restrict people's access to their social media sites or to using the Internet at all. These include:

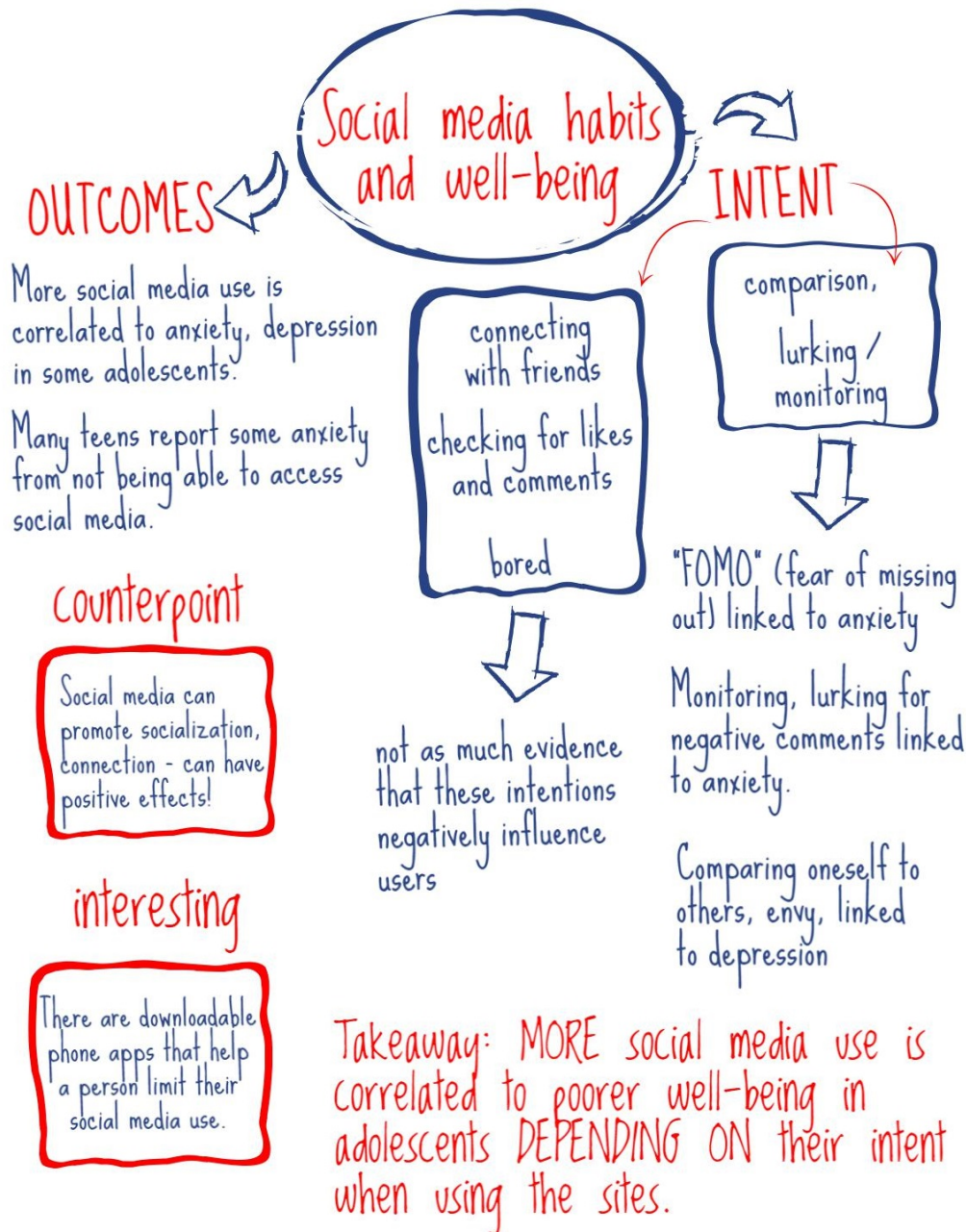


- **AntiSocial:** An application that allows users to select websites they want to block and for how long
- **SelfControl:** An application that allows users to block access to the Internet entirely for a preset amount of time
- **Cold Turkey:** An application that does not block a user's access to the Internet or to any particular websites but does track and display how one spends his or her time online

Mark wonders who is using these apps. Are busy professionals utilizing them? Do his students know about them or use them? Can parents install these apps for their children? He's also now more convinced than ever that his research investigation will have an interested audience. Not only is the social science issue very well-researched, but there are real-world applications for the findings. Mark believes he's building a solid case for the research department's next project.

## Organizing the Findings

Mark spends some time organizing his findings. He maps out some of the key takeaways he's discovered.



Overall, Mark now understands that social media can have a positive or negative influence on adolescents depending on their intentions when using the sites. Social media can be beneficial for some users because they help maintain relationships, especially ones from afar. Further, they provide users positive feedback in the form of social support.

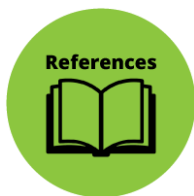
However, people who spend more time on social media lurking and monitoring (viewing others' profiles without posting or commenting) reported having higher anxiety. Adolescents reported that this

anxiety came from a fear that friends were hanging out without them, that they might miss the online conversation, or that others might be saying negative things about them.

Further, more social media use correlates to depression but only when users are "surveilling" others' posts and feeling envious.

In thinking about presenting these findings to his university research department, Mark knows that he will need to reference the credible works that have led him to these conclusions. He has a few resources that he is certain he will use. The first is the article, "[#Being Thirteen: Social Media and the Hidden World of Young Adolescents' Peer Culture](#)" (Underwood, 2015). This article provides much of the information about teens' intentions behind their habits when using social media sites. Another study — "[Facebook Use, Envy, and Depression Among College Students: Is Facebooking Depressing?](#)" — helped Mark find information on social media users' envy (Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015).

Mark's list includes several other resources that, while credible, are no longer relevant since he has organized his findings and narrowed his focus. He will need to cull through this list and remove any that are not pertinent to the message that he will deliver during his pitch to the department leaders.



Tandoc, E. C., Ferrucci, P., & Duffy, M. (2015). "Facebook use, envy, and depression among college students: Is Facebooking depressing?" *Computers in Human Behavior*, 43, 139-146. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.10.053

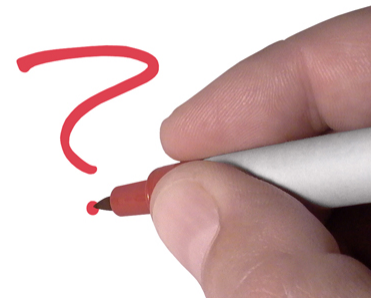
Underwood, M. (2015). "[#Being thirteen: Social media and the hidden world of young adolescents' peer culture.](#)" CNN.com.

## What Is a Research Question?

Now that you have located credible resources on your social science issue and spent some time evaluating those resources, it is time to develop your research question. The research question should look at all the preliminary research that you have done on your social science issue and propose a new question.

That question could target gaps in the current research. The research question could also look to the future of the field and propose a question that would require entirely new research.

For example, consider a social scientist that is examining the social norms related to e-cigarette use in teens. He has researched the negative health effects of e-cigarettes. He has researched the social norms related to teen use of e-cigarettes. He has researched the efficacy of social media campaigns that teach kids about the dangers of alcohol and cigarette use. However, he is not currently aware of any social media campaigns that educate students about the dangers of *e-cigarette* use. Therefore, he presumes that there are not currently studies determining whether such a campaign could influence their social norms. There is potential here for new research! His research



question becomes: *How could a social media campaign aimed at educating teens about the health risks of e-cigarettes change their social norms?*

Or, consider Mark. He has examined the benefits and drawbacks of using social media, depending on a person's intention when using these sites. He has identified some apps that can help a person limit his or her social media use, but he has not discovered any studies showing their efficacy. He hasn't found any research showing ways to influence teens' habits or intentions when using social media or whether that would have a positive effect on their well-being. Mark has a few potential research questions that he could ask.

A good research question requires analysis and critical thinking. Your question should have more than a simple "yes" or "no" answer. If your question can only be answered by a series of facts, then it is not critical enough.

#### **Critical research questions:**

- Lead to more questions
- Require further analysis of text
- Provoke further discussion
- Move you outside of your own frame of reference in order to understand issues on a larger scale
- Focus on the audience and the message (which you will learn more about in the next learning blocks)

### **Avoiding Unworkable Research Questions**

Remember that not every question can be answered through research. Your audience won't be interested in reading research papers that answer questions to which they already know the answers. Read each of the unworkable research questions below, then see how he or she revises the question into something that can be answered using research. Click the arrows to move to on to the next person or back to the previous person.

#### **Shawna**

Proposed unworkable research question: "Why is interacting on Twitter a waste of time?"

#### **Alicia**

Proposed unworkable research question: "What are the barriers to access healthy foods for a person living with diabetes and allergies in Shelton?"

#### **Donald, teaching**

Proposed unworkable research question: "Why is child poverty bad?"

#### **Luis, business**

Proposed unworkable research question: "Is it immoral for Christian business owners to serve patrons that do not uphold Christian principles?"

**Assessment advice:** Stay away from topics that are based on opinion or taste. Stick to questions that can be answered through research.



**Writer:** Shawna

**Social Science Issue:** the effect of social networking on mass communication

**Thought process:** All of my friends are obsessed with Twitter. They say it has revolutionized the way that the public has mass conversations online. I think it's a bunch of people complaining and talking about Beyoncé. What a waste of time!

**Proposed research question:** Why is interacting on Twitter a waste of time?

**Issues:** As I did preliminary research, I realized that it was really difficult to define what should be considered a waste of time. I needed to revise my research question into something I can support with research.

**Revised research question:** What effect has Twitter had on mass interaction and conversation?

**Assessment advice:** Stay away from topics with scopes that are too narrow or topics that are only of personal importance. Your topic should be of local, regional, national, or international scope.



**Writer:** Alicia

**Social Science Issue:** availability of nutritious foods to low income populations

**Thought process:** I have diabetes, a shellfish allergy, and I like to cook healthy dishes full of vegetables. I'm lucky that there are many grocery shops within driving distance of my house. Many low socioeconomic areas in the United States do not have access to healthy food options. Just one town over, in the poorer town of Shelton, there aren't any grocery stores accessible by public transportation; only fast food restaurants.

**Proposed research question:** What are the barriers to access healthy foods for a person living with diabetes and allergies in Shelton?

**Issues:** When I started my research, I found that it was really difficult to find resources addressing my whole research question. There is *no* research on the town of Shelton. When I thought about it, I realized that this question is pretty narrow; I have to widen my focus.

**Revised research question:** What effect does geography have on health in the United States in terms of availability of healthy food?



**Assessment advice:** Avoid questions that you and your audience already know the answer to and are not likely to disagree with.



**Writer:** Donald

**Social Science Issue:** child poverty in the United States

**Thought process:** I read an article about children living in poverty the other day; it's a very prevalent issue. Poverty can affect every aspect of a child's life, so there are many avenues for research.

**Proposed research question:** Why is child poverty bad?

**Issues:** I was discussing my research project with a friend and told her about my research question. She answered this question in five minutes, and she didn't need any of the research I found! I realized that this research question might be too obvious.

**Revised research question:** How does living in poverty during childhood impact a person's mental health throughout their life?

**Assessment advice:** Stay away from topics that are based on moral belief or faith. Stick to questions that can be answered through research.



**Writer:** Luis

**Social Science Issue:** the influence of religion on business

**Thought process:** Some companies founded or owned by people with strong religious beliefs deny services to people who do not share their beliefs. These people believe that in all aspects of their lives, they must uphold their beliefs; thus, they feel that the act of serving people who act immorally would be, in and of itself, an immoral act.

**Proposed research question:** Is it immoral for Christian business owners to serve patrons that do not uphold Christian principles?

**Issues:** As I began my research, I realized that I couldn't prove that a company is morally obligated to do anything without referring to the Bible, other religious texts, or beliefs about religion or morality in general. However, I can't assume that a general audience is going to accept the Bible as evidence. If I want to make the argument that a company should make decisions based on some belief system, I'll need to base my argument on credible research—like the measurable influence of religion on business practices. Also, I shouldn't ask a yes or no question.

**Revised research question:** How does a company's stated religious principles relate to sales revenue across different demographics?

## Mark's Research Question

Now that Mark has selected the credible sources that will provide the backbone for his research investigation, he is ready to come up with his research question. In coming up with a research question, Mark asks himself the following:

- What do I want to learn more about?
- What would others want to learn more about?
- Who would benefit from the research findings?
- Who could best help in addressing the issue?

Mark's search for sources opened the floodgates of additional questions related to social media habits that Mark is interested in answering. However, he keeps coming back to his daughter Julia. How does her social media usage affect her state of mind and emotional health? He believes that her intentions while using social media are contributing to her anxiety. She is definitely monitoring others' posts, and she compares herself to others. Mark isn't sure how to change her attitude while using her social media sites, but he wonders whether using social media less, or even differently, would help lessen her anxious behaviors. He wonders if she would consider using one of those apps he discovered. Suddenly, Mark realizes he has his research question:

How could phone applications that limit social media engagement influence teens' habits and intentions?

Mark knows that he is not alone in wanting an answer to this question. With technology and social media being such a huge part of adolescent culture, he reasons that many parents of teenagers must be wondering the same thing. In fact, anyone working with teens-high school teachers, for instance-would likely be interested in his findings.

Mark's research question leads him to ask some additional questions that would dictate the next steps in his investigation. He must now consider the following:

- Which apps will he use for his investigation?
- Based on the research, can he make a prediction about how those apps will influence teens' habits and intentions? What is his hypothesis of the outcome?
- How will he recruit and select participants for his research?
- How might he be able to measure any changes in habits and intentions?
- Based on the outcome, who would be most interested in the findings?

Mark looks forward to continuing his investigation; he feels that the applications of this research will be helpful to parents and teens everywhere. Further, he is excited to have a workable research question to submit to his university research department. He is sure they'll approve the idea.

## Mark's Final Thoughts

Mark's research investigation began with a simple question born out of his concern for his daughter. What effect did her social media habits have on her mood and behavior? Mark's quest for an answer to this question was an eye-opening, informative experience. As he searched for articles and studies on the social media habits of adolescents, he was excited to find that there is a significant amount of research on this topic. However, there are many more questions related to this social science issue yet to be answered. Mark's research question, which he hopes will be approved as a project for his university research department, is just one step toward mapping the issue more completely.



Mark's experience locating and evaluating credible resources has helped him form a well-rounded understanding of the social science issue. Further, his work finding credible sources that support his research question have him feeling confident that his university colleagues will see the value in his research proposal. Finally, he is excited to approach his wife and Julia with the suggestion of using an app that could help curb social media use, and as a result, potentially Julia's anxiety. Mark's research investigation has been a positive experience, and he is interested to see where further work in these areas will take him and his family personally and professionally.