## Choosing Your Research Topic

### **Identify Your Topic**

Selecting a topic is the first step. If the choice is up to you, pick a topic that interests you. Think broadly about your topic and do some preliminary research by consulting subject encyclopedias, dictionaries or handbooks. You can also check appropriate current periodicals or browse shelves of books classed in subject areas to get ideas on research topics.

### **Refine Your Topic**

You will probably have to narrow your topic since most topics are too broad for a research paper. For example, you want to research the use of Ancient Greek comedy.

This topic is still too broad and you will need to further refine it.  For example: Women's role in the comedies of Plautus.

### **Develop Your Topic**

Once you have identified your topic:

* State the topic in the form of a specific statement or question.
* Identify the main concepts, terms and keywords that describe your topic.
* Start making a list of words to describe your topic.

Use dictionaries and thesauri to define other terms to build a useful list of terms. These terms will become the keywords for searching catalogues, indexes, and databases for information about your subject.

For example:

Main concepts:               women, role, comedies, Plautus

Secondary concepts:     female, women, woman,   
                                          role, character, characterization   
                                          comedy, comic drama, , Plautus, Miles Gloriosus

Once you have identified key terms for your topic, you are ready to shape your strategy for searching catalogues, indexes and databases.

To visually spell out the concepts and relationships among the ideas, check out these [**examples of concept tables**](http://library.queensu.ca/files/concepttables.pdf). (Virginia Tech University Libraries)

### **Form a Search Strategy**

Go to the section on **Search Strategies**as well as University of Saskatchewan Library's How to Formulate a Search Strategy [**guide.**](http://libguides.usask.ca/c.php?g=16394&p=90470)

Background Information

Once you have identified the main topic and keywords for your research, the next step is to find sources of background information. This is especially important if you are unfamiliar with the subject or not sure how to approach your topic.

Background information can be found in textbooks, dictionaries, general and subject-specific encyclopedias to name a few and can give you ....

* A broad overview of the subject
* Definitions of the topic
* An introduction to key issues
* Names of people who are authorities in the field
* Major dates and events
* Lead to bibliographies which provide additional sources of information.

## Search Strategies

When conducting research, the key to successful searching is not in the quantity of search results, but rather how relevant and appropriate they are to the topic.

Whether you are searching the web with a search engine such as Google, or searching a research resource like Summon, the Library catalogue (QCAT) or another library database, there are some common search techniques that can be employed to improve the efficiency of the search results.

In order to retrieve the most relevant results, you will need to construct a search string.  A search string is a combination of keywords, truncation symbols, and boolean operators you enter into the search box of a library database or search engine.

For more information on how to develop a search strategy that will assist you to locate relevant information, check out the University of Saskatchewan Library's [**guide**](http://libguides.usask.ca/c.php?g=16394&p=90470).

## Evaluating Sources Checklist

Carefully evaluate each source you find to determine if it is appropriate for your research. Previously, we discussed how academic journal articles can be distinguished from other types of periodicals. Here is a checklist for criteria used to judge information sources, particularly books.

**Evaluating Sources Checklist**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Purpose** | Why was the resource written? Was the author's purpose to inform, persuade, or to refute a particular idea or point of view? |
| **Audience** | Is the resource intended for the general public, scholars, professionals,etc. |
| **Authority** | What are the author's qualifications? Consider author's educational background, past writings and experience. Is the author associated with an organization or institution? Who is the publisher? Are they well known? Does any group control the publishing company? |
| **Accuracy** | Is the information covered fact, opinion, or propaganda? Facts can be usually verified. Opinions evolve from the interpretation of facts. Are the author's conclusions or facts supported with references? |
| **Timeliness** | When was the information published? Is the date of publication appropriate for your topic? |
| **Coverage** | Is it relevant to your topic? Is the topic covered in depth, partially or is it an broad overview? Does the resource add new information, update other sources or substantiate other resources that you have consulted? |
| **Objectivity** | Does the author present multiple viewpoints or is it biased? How do critical reviews rate the work? |

Writing Critical Reviews

**What is a Critical Review of a Journal Article?**

A critical review of a journal article evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of an article's ideas and content. It provides description, analysis and interpretation that allow readers to assess the article's value.

**Before You Read the Article**

* What does the title lead you to expect about the article?
* Study any sub-headings to understand how the author organized the content.
* Read the abstract for a summary of the author's arguments.
* Study the list of references to determine what research contributed to the author's arguments. Are the references recent? Do they represent important work in the field?
* If possible, read about the author to learn what authority he or she has to write about the subject.
* Consult Web of Science to see if other writers have cited the author's work. (Please see 'How to use E-Indexes'.) Has the author made an important contribution to the field of study?

**Reading the Article: Points to Consider**

Read the article carefully. Record your impressions and note sections suitable for quoting.

* Who is the intended audience?
* What is the author's purpose? To survey and summarize research on a topic? To present an argument that builds on past research? To refute another writer's argument?
* Does the author define important terms?
* Is the information in the article fact or opinion? (Facts can be verified, while opinions arise from interpretations of facts.) Does the information seem well-researched or is it unsupported?
* What are the author's central arguments or conclusions? Are they clearly stated? Are they supported by evidence and analysis?
* If the article reports on an experiment or study, does the author clearly outline methodology and the expected result?
* Is the article lacking information or argumentation that you expected to find?
* Is the article organized logically and easy to follow?
* Does the writer's style suit the intended audience? Is the style stilted or unnecessarily complicated?
* Is the author's language objective or charged with emotion and bias?
* If illustrations or charts are used, are they effective in presenting information?

**Prepare an Outline**

Read over your notes. Choose a statement that expresses the central purpose or thesis of your review. When thinking of a thesis, consider the author's intentions and whether or not you think those intentions were successfully realized. Eliminate all notes that do not relate to your thesis. Organize your remaining points into separate groups such as points about structure, style, or argument. Devise a logical sequence for presenting these ideas. Remember that all of your ideas must support your central thesis.

**Write the First Draft**

The review should begin with a complete citation of the article. For example:

Platt, Kevin M.F. "History and Despotism, or: Hayden White vs. Ivan the Terrible  and Peter the Great." Rethinking History 3:3 (1999) : 247-269.

NOTE: Use the same bibliographic citation format as you would for any bibliography, works cited or reference list. It will follow a standard documentation style such as MLA or APA.

Be sure to ask your instructor which citation style to use. For frequently used style guides consult Queen's University Library's [**Citing Sources**](http://library.queensu.ca/help-services/citing-sources) guide.

The first paragraph may contain:

* a statement of your thesis
* the author's purpose in writing the article
* comments on how the article relates to other work on the same subject
* information about the author's reputation or authority in the field

The body of the review should:

* state your arguments in support of your thesis
* follow the logical development of ideas that you mapped out in your outline
* include quotations from the article which illustrate your main ideas

The concluding paragraph may:

* summarize your review
* restate your thesis

**Revise the First Draft**

Ideally, you should leave your first draft for a day or two before revising. This allows you to gain a more objective perspective on your ideas. Check for the following when revising:

* grammar and punctuation errors
* organization, logical development and solid support of your thesis
* errors in quotations or in references

You may make major revisions in the organization or content of your review during the revision process. Revising can even lead to a radical change in your central thesis.

NOTE: Prepared by University of Toronto Mississauga Library, Hazel McCallion Academic Learning Centre.