



The Research Process – HOW TO RESEARCH

As a college student, you will be asked to write research papers for your classes. Developing a plan of action, using the research process, will help you to methodically direct your efforts toward finding quality resources. Without a plan, it is easy to lose focus and become discouraged. Use the steps in this guide to help you become an efficient and effective researcher.

If You Need Help, Ask a Librarian at the Reference Desk

Step 1: Select a topic

Sometimes your professor will give you a topic to research. If not, you will have to select a topic based on the subject matter of the class or something of interest to you. You might browse through your course textbook or readings to get ideas.



Step 2: Do some background reading

Acquire a general understanding of the topic you choose. Use the reference collection in the EVC library or online reference sources, like Britannica Online, to get an overview of your topic or to find general background information on your topic. Encyclopedias will be very useful for this purpose.

Step 3: Focus the topic

General topics are usually very broad. Since most research papers require less than 15 pages, you will need to narrow your topic by finding a focus. Normally, you will get ideas from your background reading that will help you focus or narrow your topic. For example, if your general topic is global warming, you could focus on the impact of hybrid cars on the environment.



Step 4: Form a research question

Turning your focused topic into a research question will help you explore your topic without bias. A question such as, “How do hybrid cars impact the environment?” will allow you to look at all aspects of the topic. Conversely, a statement such as “The benefits of hybrid cars on the environment” might limit your exploration and make your understanding of this topic relatively one-sided.

Step 5: Define concepts or keywords

Keywords are used to search and retrieve relevant resources from the library’s catalog and online databases. Your keywords need to be specific, simple and represent your topic. For example, the keywords for the question posed in Step 4 would be “hybrid cars” and “environment”. You might also need to find synonyms for your keywords, such as “automobiles” or “motor vehicles” or related terms such as “carbon footprint” or “global warming”. You might even need to refine your search with other terms such as “impact” or “affect”.

Step 6: Conduct in depth research

Now that you have a focused research question and keywords to search with, you will need to find books and journal articles on your topic. Use your keywords to search the library’s catalog for books and the online databases for articles. Be sure to evaluate each source for its credibility, particularly if you also use websites from the open Internet. Write down or print the bibliographic information (author, title, etc.) from your sources as you conduct your research.



Step 7: Read, synthesize and write

Read the resources you have found and begin to organize your information. You should be refining your arguments and developing your supporting points. Begin writing your paper once you are confident that you have created a logical argument and can support it with credible research.

Step 8: Cite your sources

Give credit where credit is due. You will need to cite the information taken from the sources you use. There are a number of different citation styles, such as MLA and APA. Be sure to confirm with your professor which citation format is required.