The Seven Steps of the Research Process

The following seven steps outline a simple and effective strategy for finding information for a research paper and documenting the sources you find. Depending on your topic and your familiarity with the library, you may need to rearrange or recycle these steps. Adapt this outline to your needs.

STEP 1: IDENTIFY AND DEVELOP YOUR TOPIC.
SUMMARY: State your topic as a question. For example, if you are interested in finding out about use of alcoholic beverages by college students, you might pose the question, "What effect does use of alcoholic beverages have on the health of college students?" Identify the main concepts or keywords in your question.
More details on how to identify and develop your topic.

STEP 2: FIND BACKGROUND INFORMATION.
SUMMARY: Look up your keywords in the indexes to subject encyclopedias. Read articles in these encyclopedias to set the context for your research. Note any relevant items in the bibliographies at the end of the encyclopedia articles. Additional background information may be found in your lecture notes, textbooks, and reserve readings.
More suggestions on how to find background information.
Return to the top

STEP 3: USE CATALOGS TO FIND BOOKS AND MEDIA.
SUMMARY: Use keyword searching for a narrow or complex search topic. Use subject searching for a broad subject. Print or write down the citation (author, title,etc.) and the location information (call number and library). Note the circulation status. When you pull the book from the shelf, scan the bibliography for additional sources. Watch for book-length bibliographies and annual reviews on your subject; they list citations to hundreds of books and articles in one subject area. Check the standard subject subheading "--BIBLIOGRAPHIES," or titles beginning with Annual Review of... in the Cornell Library Catalog.
More detailed instructions for using catalogs to find books.
Finding media (audio and video) titles.

STEP 4: USE INDEXES TO FIND PERIODICAL ARTICLES
SUMMARY: Use periodical indexes and abstracts to find citations to articles. The indexes and abstracts may be in print or computer-based formats or both. Choose the indexes and format best suited to your particular topic; ask at the reference desk if you need help figuring out which index and format will be best. You can find periodical articles by the article author, title, or keyword by using the periodical indexes in the Library Gateway. If the full text is not linked in the index you are using, write down the citation from the index and search for the title of the periodical in the Cornell Library Catalog. The catalog lists the print, microform, and electronic versions of periodicals at Cornell.
How to find and use periodical indexes at Cornell.
Return to the top

STEP 5: FIND INTERNET RESOURCES
SUMMARY: Use search engines and subject directories to locate materials on the Web. Check to see if your class has a bibliography or research guide created by librarians.
Links for learning how to find information on the Internet.

STEP 6: EVALUATE WHAT YOU FIND
SUMMARY: See How to Critically Analyze Information Sources and Distinguishing Scholarly from Non-Scholarly Periodicals: A Checklist of Criteria for suggestions on evaluating the authority and quality of the books and articles you located. If you have found too many or too few sources, you may need to narrow or broaden your topic. Check with a reference librarian or your instructor.

When you're ready to write, here is an annotated list of books to help you organize, format, and write your paper.

STEP 7: CITE WHAT YOU FIND USING A STANDARD FORMAT
Give credit where credit is due; cite your sources.

Citing or documenting the sources used in your research serves two purposes, it gives proper credit to the authors of the materials used, and it allows those who are reading your work to duplicate your research and locate the sources that you have listed as references. Knowingly representing the work of others as your own is plagarism. (See Cornell's Code of Academic Integrity). Use one of the styles listed below or another style approved by your instructor. **Handouts summarizing the APA and MLA styles are available** at Uris and Olin Reference.

Available online:

- Format the citations in your bibliography using examples from the following Library Gatyeway Help pages: **Modern Language Association (MLA) examples** and **American Psychological Association (APA) examples**.
- A brief online version of The Columbia Guide to Online Style also gives examples for citing networked resources only.

Available in print (book) format:

- Gibaldi, Joseph. **MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers.** 6th ed. New York: MLA, 2003.
  (Olin Ref Z 253 .M68 2003; also Uris Ref, others)

  This handbook is based on the *MLA Style Manual* (Olin and Uris Ref PN 147 .G444x 1998) and is intended as an aid for college students writing research papers. Included here is information on selecting a topic, researching the topic, note taking, the writing of footnotes and bibliographies, as well as sample pages of a research paper. Useful for the beginning researcher.

- **Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association**. 5th ed. Washington: APA, 2001. **(Olin Ref BF 76.7 .P83x 2001; also Uris Ref, Mann Ref, others)**

  The authoritative style manual for anyone writing in the field of psychology. Useful for the social sciences generally. Chapters discuss the content and organization of a manuscript, writing style, the American Psychological Association citation style, and typing, mailing and proofreading.