1. Select a General Topic.

Research for an assigned paper or other presentation takes a lot of time and effort, so enjoy the process by researching something that holds your interest. Even if your topic is pre-assigned and seems not very interesting at first, try to think of an aspect of the topic that will make the process rewarding for you. If stuck, talk to your instructor to see if you can design your own topic.

Below are some questions that might help you construct an interesting research topic. Don’t rush through this part of the process. It’s critical, so spend at least a few minutes thinking carefully about each question.

- What do you like to do?
- What do you like to experience (to see, hear, etc.)?
- What outrages you?
- What brings you joy?
- Do you have any professional decisions to make in the near or not-so-near future?
- Do you have any academic decisions to make?
- Do you have any personal decisions to make?
- Do you have any political decisions to make?
- What about the world do you wish you understood better?
- What about yourself do you wish you understood better?
Tell your instructors what your interests are, and they may be able to help you fashion Research Topics that both suit your interests and that meet their assignments' requirements. Even when instructors assign Research Topics, they'll usually work with you to find a way to make research projects interesting for you.

GENERAL TOPIC IS: _______________________________________________________

WRITE DOWN ANYTHING YOU ALREADY KNOW ABOUT THE TOPIC; TRY TO THINK OF AT LEAST THREE THINGS:

WRITE DOWN ANY PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS YOU HAVE ABOUT THE TOPIC; TRY TO THINK OF AT LEAST THREE QUESTIONS:
2. Develop Search Vocabulary

To dramatically increase the relevancy and usefulness of the information you find, you should conduct multiple searches using different search language. To this end, it is helpful to create a list of possible search terms. As you research, add to your list any words or phrases you commonly see. You might also use a thesaurus (try thesaurus.com) to find synonyms. Mark each word or phrase on your list as a synonym for your topic, or as a broader topic, a narrower topic, or a related topic.

Please note: when searching, avoid using connective words (like and, but, or), articles (like a, an, the), and other very common words; try to use only nouns and verbs.

LIST POSSIBLE KEYWORDS AND PHRASES FOR YOUR TOPIC:

CREATE SEARCH STRINGS:

Main terms go down. Synonyms or related terms for each go across.

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<td>university</td>
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<td>higher education</td>
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3. Find Background Information

Read background material to get an overview of your subject. Overviews often introduce us to historical contexts as well as current controversies surrounding a particular topic. You may find information that will help broaden or narrow your topic, as well as more potential search terms. You might find answers to preliminary questions (from Step 1) that you had about the topic.

The Library’s Reference collection is a great place to start. You will find information from encyclopedias, dictionaries, handbooks, etc., some of which are general in nature, and some of which are very specialized. For assistance, stop by the reference desk, email refdesk@aacc.edu, or call (410) 777-2456.

You can access many online reference books by going to the Library’s main page (www.aacc.edu/library) and choosing “Library Databases.” Look under the “A-Z” tab to find Credo Reference, ABC-CLIO ebook Collection, and Gale Reference Library, all of which contain encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases, and other reference books.

LIST THE RESOURCES YOU SEARCHED FOR BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

•
•

DID BACKGROUND INFORMATION ANSWER ALL INITIAL QUESTIONS (FROM STEP 1)?

☐ Yes ☐ No (If No, unanswered questions may be useful in Step 5.)

4. Narrow or Broaden the Topic

If you find far too much background information on your topic, consider picking a sub-topic. Perhaps use vocabulary (from Step 2) that you labeled "narrower topic."

NARROWED TOPIC: ______________________________________________

If you find far too little background information on your topic, consider choosing a broader topic. Perhaps use vocabulary (from Step 2) that you labeled "broader topic."

BROADENED TOPIC: ______________________________________________
5. Focus Your Research

Now that you have a general sense of your topic, you want to develop several research questions. The answers to these research questions should have the potential to impact what you think about the topic, so avoid questions that will lead only to information that supports your current thinking. If any of your initial questions (from Step 1) were not answered using background information, you may be able to develop them into research questions.

POSSIBLE RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________

2. _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________

3. _____________________________________________________________________
   _____________________________________________________________________

Note: consider where you might find information to answer your research questions (articles, books, audio/visual materials, government publications, websites, etc.).

Example: What have literary critics said about the role of the Ghost in *Hamlet*? What were the prevailing beliefs in Elizabethan times about ghosts? Did Shakespeare use ghosts in other plays, and, if so, how? (books, articles)

Example: Do we know what causes autism? How many different kinds of autism are there, and how are they different? What are current treatments for people with autism? (books, articles)

Example: How has Proctor & Gamble used animals to test their products? Does Proctor & Gamble publish its corporate position on animal testing? How has Proctor & Gamble responded to boycotts for testing products on animals? (articles, websites)
6. Find Current and Specific Information: Library Databases

Use Library Databases to access:
- periodical articles, abstracts, and citations (newspapers, magazines, journals, etc.)
- a large selection of current reference books (encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc.)
- a growing collection of other books (on a huge range of topics)
- a growing collection of multimedia resources (online videos, music, images, etc.)

From the Library’s main page (www.aacc.edu/library), choose “Library Databases.”
From off-campus, enter the barcode number from the back of your AACC Photo ID or Truxal Library card. View materials online, print them, and/or email them. Remember, you can't use abstracts or citations as if they are the full text of articles. You must acquire the full text to use information in a paper or other presentation.

Please Note: Sources from these databases are NOT considered "internet" or "web" sources, although we access them through the internet.

BE SURE TO GATHER ALL OF THE INFORMATION THAT YOU WILL NEED TO CREATE CITATIONS FOR THESE SOURCES:

For Books
Full name(s) of author(s) or editor(s):
Full title of the book:
Facts of publication (city, publisher, date):
If there is more than one edition of the book, edition number:
If applicable, name of series, volume number, and total volumes in the series:
Page number(s), if available online, for information read or noted:
Name of the database where you found the book (or excerpt), if applicable:
Date you accessed the book:
URL (web address that starts with http://):
DOI (digital object identifier), if provided:

For Journal, Magazine, and Newspaper Articles
Full name(s) of author(s):
Full title of the article:
Full title of the journal, magazine, or newspaper:
Facts of publication (publication date and, if applicable, volume and issue numbers):
Starting and ending page number(s), if available online, for the article:
Page number(s) for information noted:
Name of the database where you found the article, if applicable:
Date you accessed the article:
URL (web address that starts with http://):
DOI (digital object identifier), if provided:
Find Detailed and Historical Information: Library Catalog

To find information about books, periodicals, and audio/visual materials housed in Truxal Library, go to the Library’s main page (www.aacc.edu/library), and choose “Library Catalog.” If you find something that you would like to read but you are not able to come to the Library, contact the Information Resources Librarian to arrange for delivery at DLLibrarian@aacc.edu or (410) 777-2216. You may also use the resources of your local public library or community college library.

Please note: Truxal Library books on popular topics get checked out early and can be checked out for four weeks, so start your research as soon as possible.

BE SURE TO GATHER THE INFORMATION THAT YOU WILL NEED TO CREATE CITATIONS FOR THESE SOURCES:

For Books
Full name(s) of author(s) or editor(s):
Full title of the book:
Facts of publication (city, publisher, date):
If there is more than one edition of the book, edition number or description:
If applicable, name of series, volume number, and total volumes in the series:
Page number(s) for information read or noted:
DOI (digital object identifier), if provided:

For Journal, Magazine, and Newspaper Articles
Full name(s) of author(s):
Full title of the article:
Full title of the journal, magazine, or newspaper:
Facts of publication (publication date and, if applicable, volume and issue numbers):
Starting and ending page number(s) for the article:
Page number(s) for information noted:
DOI (digital object identifier), if provided:

For Audio/Visual Materials
7. Find Current and Specific Information: The Internet

Many websites contain reliable information, but anyone can publish a website, so be especially cautious and critical when using information from internet sources.

USE THIS CHECKLIST FOR EVALUATING WEBSITES:

☐ Currency
   Is there a copyright date? When was the site last updated?

☐ Authority
   Who is authoring the information? Is it clear who sponsors the site and what the sponsor’s purpose is? Is this a recognized organization or individual? Is there information on how to contact them? Is there a list of references?

☐ Accuracy
   Does the information appear to be accurate (spelling, format, etc.)? Are the webpages easy to navigate, structurally sound, and usable? Can you verify the information elsewhere? Do others in the field review the content of the site?

☐ Objectivity
   What goals do the pages meet? What biases are reflected in the site? Is the information intended to persuade the audience? Does this site link only to similar points-of-view?

☐ Coverage
   Is the website still under construction? Does the site provide a comprehensive range of thought and theory on the subject?

☐ Final Questions:
   Is the site relevant to my topic? How? Is this the best information I can find on my topic? Does this site complement material I have already gathered?

BE SURE TO GATHER THE INFORMATION THAT YOU WILL NEED TO CREATE CITATIONS FOR THESE SOURCES:

For Websites
   Full name(s) of author(s), editor(s), and/or sponsor(s) of the website:
   Title of the website:
   Date the website was last updated or original date of electronic publication:
   Date you accessed the website:
   URL (web address that starts with http://):
   Full information about any previous or simultaneous publication in print form:
8. Cite Sources

There are many standard methods—or styles—for composing citations. The style determines the order of the information in the citation, as well as punctuation and other formatting. Citation style is often related to your field of study, but you should always verify with your instructor which style to use. To learn more about styles, visit Truxal Library’s citation guide (http://libguides.aacc.edu/citationguide), roll your cursor over the “Citing Sources Overview” tab, and choose “Citation Styles” from the menu.

**MLA STYLE** is used for citations for literature, arts, and humanities. Consult the Library’s pamphlet, “How to Cite Sources: MLA Style,” or ask at the reference desk for the authoritative text:


**APA STYLE** is most often used for citations for psychology, education, and other social sciences. Consult the Library’s pamphlet, “How to Cite Sources: APA Style,” or ask at the reference desk for the authoritative text:


**CHICAGO STYLE**: citations for non-scholarly publications, like general interest books, magazines, and newspapers. Ask at the reference desk for the authoritative text:


*Note: other standard citation styles include Turabian, American Medical Association, and Scientific Style and Format.*

If you have questions or need assistance, contact the reference desk at refdesk@aacc.edu or (410) 777-2456. You may also contact the Information Resources Librarian at (410) 777-2216 or DLLibrarian@aacc.edu.