Developing a Research Strategy

1. Getting Started

So, you have an assignment and you need to find some information and you’re not sure where to begin?

What does research mean? Well, it involves:
- Asking questions
- Gathering information
- Assessing or evaluating information
- Organizing and then presenting the information

2. Background Information

Before you begin your research, or as part of your research strategy, get some background information on your topic. Start by looking through reference materials, such as:
- general encyclopedias
- subject specific encyclopedias
- dictionaries
- almanacs
- course textbooks

These will give you a basic overview and may also provide lists of articles and books for additional reading. Don’t forget to check your lecture notes and any Reserve readings!

3. Narrowing (or broadening) your Topic

You will probably need to narrow the focus of your topic since most topics are too broad to be covered in a research paper. But sometimes a topic is so narrow in scope that little can be found on it. In that case, you need to expand your focus.

Go from a general topic, to a more specific topic and then hone it to the precise topic that you will research. For example:
- A general topic might be media violence.
- A more specific topic might be the effects of media violence on children.
- And your precise topic might be the behavioral effects of television violence on preschool children.

State your topic as a question. This will help you formulate your thesis or the main point of your topic. This will usually be stated at the beginning of your paper. For this example, you might pose the question:

“What are the behavioral effects of television violence on preschool children?”

In addition, you can brainstorm other questions that might have bearing on your topic, such as:
- How many hours of television do children watch?
- How are violent children’s programs identified?
- Are there research studies that have observed children before and after watching violent programs?

4. Shape your Search Strategy

Once you have your research question, you can begin to look for books and videos in the library catalogue and for articles in the library databases (‘Find Articles’ tab -> Databases by Subject). How do you do this?

a. Identify the key concepts and terms in your research question.

“What are the behavioral effects of television violence on preschool children?”

b. Think of related terms for these concepts.

behavioral effects – acting out, conduct
- television – TV, prime time
- violence – aggression, brutality, cruelty
- preschool children – toddlers, tots, infants, kids

c. Combine terms using Boolean operators.

AND - narrows and locates items that have ALL your search terms
Example: television AND violence AND preschool children

OR - broadens and locates items that have ANY of your terms
Example: violence OR aggression OR brutality

NOT - excludes items that eliminates a concept
Example: children NOT teenagers

Other search tips:

USE BRACKETS to ensure the computer searches your terms in the proper order.
Wrong: television AND children OR kids
Right: television AND (children OR kids)

TRUNCATION use a symbol, such as * (varies by database – check the help file) to find variant endings of a root word; ie child* = child, children, childhood

WILDCARD use a symbol, such as ? (varies by database – check the help file) to find variant spellings; ie col?r = colour, color

Questions?
Come visit us at the Information and Research Assistance Desk at the Library, OR by phone at 403-329-2263 or 1-877-382-7113, OR by e-mail or instant message: http://www.uleth.ca/lib/ask_UUs/
5. Evaluate your Information

Once you have a few resources that you might use for your assignment, it's time to take a close look at your information to make sure it is credible, reliable and useful. Ask yourself the following questions for each resource that you have found:

- Is it relevant to your topic?
- Is the date of publication appropriate?
- Is the author qualified? What are the writers' educational backgrounds and experiences?
- What is the author's purpose? To inform? To persuade? To sell? To advocate?
- How was the information obtained?
- Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda? Facts can usually be verified. Opinions may or may not evolve from facts.
- Are there references and/or footnotes?
- Is the work primary or secondary in nature?
- Who is the publisher or the institution responsible for the work?
- Is the work popular or scholarly?

6. Scholarly vs. Popular

A scholarly article:
- often undergoes a peer-review process prior to publication
- provides footnotes or a Works Cited list (also called a Bibliography or Reference list)
- author is usually affiliated with an academic or research institution
- is written by scholars for scholars in the field
- reports on original research
- uses the specialized language of the discipline
- is often published by an academic, research or professional institution or association
- has few, if any, coloured illustrations or ads
- often contains graphs or charts

A popular (non-scholarly) article:
- rarely provides footnotes or a Works Cited list
- is written for the general public to entertain or provide basic information
- reports on information second or third hand
- is usually short and uses simple language
- is written by a staff writer, columnist or journalist, rarely by a scholar
- does not state the qualifications of the author
- is usually published by commercial enterprises
- includes pictures, photographs and ads, and is slick in appearance
- is not peer-reviewed

* A peer-reviewed article is always scholarly but a scholarly article does not always go through a peer-review process.

7. Write your Paper

Now it's time to write, edit and format your paper. The following are a few of the many books in the Library that can guide you in this process, including help with citation styles. More help on these processed can be found under the “Help” menu on the library home page: How-to Guides/Research Guides and Citing Sources.

Making sense: A student's guide to research and writing 
LB 2369 N67 2012

How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing 
PE1408 .S48797 2007

Academic writing: Writing and reading across the disciplines 
PE 1408 G56 1995

"They say/I say": The moves that matter in academic writing 
PE 1431 G73 2014

The nuts & bolts of college writing 
PE 1408 H3927 2003

Stylistics: A resource book for students [e-book]

Search the library catalogue for the Subject rhetoric or academic writing for more books on the topic.

The following focus on how to format and document a research paper, and are available in the Reference collection:

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers
PE 1478 G53 2009 REF

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association
BF 76.7 P83 2010 REF

The Chicago Manual of Style
Z 253 U69 2010 REF

Search the library catalogue for the Subject report writing or authorship for more books on the topic.

8. Getting Help

Come to the Information and Assistance Desk at the library (or phone or IM us): www.uleth.ca/lib/ask_us
We are happy to help you with your research!

You can also book appointments with the Writing Centre for help with stages of the writing process such as getting started, writing an essay, diagnosing weak areas, or adopting a writing standard (citation style) such as MLA, APA, or Chicago. They are located on level 10 (main level) of the Library. Appointments may be made online at http://www.uleth.ca/artsci/academic-writing/schedule-consultation