Research Skills I

To conduct research systematically and efficiently, follow the 6 steps listed below, and use the library’s home page to keep yourself on track.

Step 1. Choose a topic

Step 2. Get a general overview of the topic (background information)

Step 3. Narrow your topic (make it more specific)

Step 4. Find reliable sources

Step 5. Read, take notes, organize your citations

Step 6. Repeat steps 1-5 as much as needed before you begin writing the essay

Step 1: Choose a topic

At a loss for what to write about? The library can help you find topics of research.

Go to the A-Z Database List

Look on the right-hand side and identify the Start with These Databases box. Find topics by browsing the following databases:

CQ Researcher

Facts on File: Issues & Controversies

Opposing Viewpoints in Context

Each of the above databases has lists of topics that can help inspire you. Bonus: clicking on a topic will bring up a lot of information about it that you can use as background information to prepare you for your research.
Step 2: Read a topic overview

Researchers normally start the research process by reading background information on topics, to get an overview of the ideas, concepts, terms, important people, etc., associated with the topic.

- The library has a database specifically for background information. It’s called Gale Virtual Reference Library (GVRL)
- You can access GVRL by going to the library’s home page and searching in the box under START HERE. Just type in your general subject (ex.: tobacco) and click Search.
- When you get your results, click on a title to get to the article. If you want to cite the article, look on the right-hand side and find the Citation Tools list. Click on that and GVRL will format the citation for you in MLA and APA styles.

Q: Can I use Wikipedia for background information?

A: You should not. Wikipedia is not appropriate for researchers who are affiliated with a higher education institution. As such a researcher, you have access to materials that are of much higher quality.

Note: Some instructors allow the use of Wikipedia -- always follow your instructor’s guidelines for every assignment.

Step 3: Narrow the topic

- **Narrowing a topic means making it more specific.**
  
  Cats --- Cat diseases --- Feline leukemia --- Treatments for feline leukemia

- **Try to narrow these topics on your own:**
  
  Weather

  Cars

- **Narrowing a topic helps you identify terms to use for searching**
  
  **Topic:** Treatments for feline leukemia

  **Search terms:** "feline leukemia" AND treatments
Practice: Which of the topics below is the narrowest? Which is the broadest?
- Mars exploration
- space exploration
- cost vs. benefits of exploring Mars

Step 4: Find reliable sources

Use the library's home page to search for books and articles. Evaluate the reliability of sources using the CRAAP method. This is especially important when evaluating Web sources.

Step 5: Read, take notes, organize citations

- Reading is a crucial part of the process
- Take notes or highlight information as you read
- Save time by creating citations as you go along

Step 6: Repeat as needed

The research process is iterative, so you will need to repeat the steps more than once. If you only go through the process once, you're not doing it right, and it will show in your final product.

For help with the research process, contact the librarians at reference@pvcc.edu