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**  (Prepare)

**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.

**STEP 2: FIND BACKGROUND INFORMATION**  (Find)

**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.

**STEP 3: USE CATALOGS TO FIND BOOKS AND MEDIA**  (Find)

**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 Eastern Library Catalog.

**STEP 4: USE INDEXES TO FIND PERIODICAL ARTICLES**  (Find)
**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 EWU Library Catalog. The catalog lists the print, microform, and electronic versions of periodicals at Eastern.

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**STEP 5: FIND INTERNET RESOURCES (Find)**

**SUMMARY:** Use search engines and subject directories to locate materials on the Web.

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**STEP 6: EVALUATE WHAT YOU FIND (Think & Reflect)**

**SUMMARY:** Use the CRAAP Evaluation Guide or use Module 5 in our Research Process Tutorial and How to Identify Research Articles 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.

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**STEP 7: CITE WHAT YOU FIND USING A STANDARD FORMAT (Cite)**

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 plagiarism. Use one of the styles listed below or another style approved by your instructor.

**Available online:**

- Format the citations in your bibliography using examples from the following Library Gateway Help pages: Modern Language Association (MLA) examples and American Psychological Association (APA) examples.
Style guides in print (book) format:

  
  This handbook is based on the *MLA Style Manual* 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.

  
  If you are writing an annotated bibliography, read the following:

**WHAT IS AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY?**

An annotated bibliography is a list of citations to books, articles, and documents. Each citation is followed by a brief (usually about 150 words) descriptive and evaluative paragraph, the annotation. The purpose of the annotation is to inform the reader of the relevance, accuracy, and quality of the sources cited.

**ANNOTATIONS VS. ABSTRACTS**

Abstracts are the purely descriptive summaries often found at the beginning of scholarly journal articles or in periodical indexes. Annotations are descriptive and critical; they expose the author's point of view, clarity and appropriateness of expression, and authority.

**SAMPLE ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY ENTRY FOR A JOURNAL ARTICLE**

The following example uses the APA format for the journal citation:


The authors, researchers at the Rand Corporation and Brown University, use data from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Young Women and Young Men to test their hypothesis that nonfamily living by young adults alters their attitudes,
values, plans, and expectations, moving them away from their belief in traditional sex roles. They find their hypothesis strongly supported in young females, while the effects were fewer in studies of young males. Increasing the time away from parents before marrying increased individualism, self-sufficiency, and changes in attitudes about families. In contrast, an earlier study by Williams cited below shows no significant gender differences in sex role attitudes as a result of nonfamily living.

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**RESEARCH TIPS:**

- **WORK FROM THE GENERAL TO THE SPECIFIC.**
  Find background information first, then use more specific and recent sources.

- **RECORD WHAT YOU FIND AND WHERE YOU FOUND IT.**
  Record the complete citation for each source you find; you may need it again later.

- **TRANSLATE YOUR TOPIC INTO THE SUBJECT LANGUAGE OF THE INDEXES AND CATALOGS YOU USE.**
  Check your topic words against a thesaurus or subject heading list.

  Need help clarifying your topic?
  Need ideas about where to look next?
  Want to be sure you're using a reference source effectively?

  Ask a Librarian