I have a Research Topic – Now what?  
A Step-by-Step Guide

This tutorial assumes that you have already chosen a topic. If you are still exploring topics, see some suggestions here on choosing a topic: [Exploring your topic](#)
What are the Requirements?

- Understand the assignment!
  - Reread the assignment sheet (if given) and consider:
    - What is the instructor or are you looking for exactly?
      - i.e. what type of research,
      - in which format, how many pages,
      - how many and which type of sources needed (newspaper, books, websites, journals)?
      - Do you need primary sources or secondary sources?
Some “Pre-search” will Get You Started – Step #1

A. Start by finding an encyclopedia entry or introduction to gain **background** knowledge of your topic. At this level you want the “bird’s eye view” only in order to learn the main ideas, terminology, people, and chronology.

- Hint: use the online catalog here: Library Catalog to find books in the Traurig Library or ask a librarian
- Beware: many students rush past this point and end up backtracking to gain the foundation knowledge they need to search (and understand) academic journals

B. **Take notes of your reading**, paying close attention to the keywords and main ideas – these terms are the “keys to the castle” in databases.
Step #2 Focus your Search – Broaden your Knowledge

- Use the knowledge and keywords you have gained with your introductory text to read another, specialized source.
- As you read, ask
Writing a Research Paper

- Created by Purdue University Online Writing Lab, this hyperlinked guide is written in conversational style to help students explore the elements of a research paper: genre, topic, scope, thesis or question, research, outline, first draft, revisions and editing.


Writing a Research Paper at Colleges and Universities

- Please read the following college guide by Sharon Sorenson, author of “How to Write Research Papers”:

  - [https://www.petersons.com/blog/writing-a-research-paper-at-colleges-and-universities/](https://www.petersons.com/blog/writing-a-research-paper-at-colleges-and-universities/)
Exploring a Topic
Stumped for a topic? In your exploration of a subject, there are many books, articles and even databases that can be a starting point to choose a topic. As you read, keep an open mind and take general notes – notes in the beginning of your search are important – they focus your thoughts, capture keywords (think: names of major concepts, influential people, dates, theories, questions, etc) and prepare you to narrow or broaden your search as needed. This first part gives you a foundation of knowledge for deeper searching and understanding.
Choosing a Topic: Some Strategies to Try

Subject encyclopedia or general introduction (#1 Recommendation of Traurig Librarians) - One of the best ways to start exploring a topic is to find a subject encyclopedia or introduction to a subject – your course textbook may be good place to start. Skim the table of contents, skim chapters that interest you and look for concepts that can be put in the form of a question. Subject encyclopedias are located on the 2nd floor of the library. You can ask a librarian to help you find an encyclopedia or an introduction – we can save you a lot of time and point you in the right direction. If you’re more of an independent learner, you can browse the collection yourself or search the library catalog, located here: Traurig Library & Learning Resources Center’s Online Catalog

Point of View Reference Center- This database of articles shows both sides of controversial issues and are organized by major topic area. You can locate this database by clicking on ‘EBSCOhost’s Point of View Reference Center’ from the Blackboard library webpage under each School of Links. Or click here: Points of View Reference Center

Skim journals in your subject area – This can work well if you skim articles or the table of contents for ideas that interest you. Remember, though, that you’ll usually need to go find a subject encyclopedia or a general introduction after you settle on an idea. Current journals are located on the 2nd floor of the library. Here’s a link to the library website, click on Current Journals orange link for the titles of our journals: Library Website. You’ll need to come in to the library to look through the actual journals, though.
Choosing a Topic: Some other Ideas

**EBSCOHost** — this is the place to search for journal articles. Frankly, unless you have some background in your topic, this is like jumping in the deep end of the pool without swimming lessons. It’s generally better to search EBSCOhost after you have some understanding of the topic, but sometimes it can be a good way to learn keywords and use as a springboard for alternate or related topics. How to get there: click on ‘EBSCOhost’ from the main library webpage under the ‘Helpful Links’ area. In the ‘Choose databases’ page of EBSCOhost, click the boxes to the left of each subject area. Also, see the self-help tutorial, “How to Search for Journal Articles”

**Wikipedia: can you use it? Should you use it?** A subject of some controversy, whether Wikipedia has any place in the research process is up for debate. Check with your instructors to see if they will approve the use of Wikipedia, as a starting point for background knowledge only. (Don’t cite!)