These steps outline a simple and effective strategy for finding information for your 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. [We are ready to help you](http://www.library.cornell.edu/services/askalib.html) at every step in your research.

**Identify and Develop Your Topic**

**Find the Context: Background Information on Your Topic**

**Find Books**

**Find Articles in Journals, News Sources, Magazines**

**Find Video and Sound Recordings**

**Evaluate What You Find**

**Cite What You Find**

**Identify a Topic**

If you haven't picked a topic yet, **scroll down to the next box--Suggestions for Finding a Topic**.

**State your topic idea 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. In this case they are alcoholic beverages, health, and college students.

**Suggestions for Finding a Topic**

Discuss your topic ideas with your **class instructor**.

Discuss your topic ideas with a **reference librarian**. It may be wise to set up a research consultation. You can [request a personal research consultation using this online form](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/consultation).

Browse likely topics using our [**Online Encyclopedias guide**](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/encyclopedias).

Explore current topics using [**News Collections Online**](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/news_online) and **[CQ Researcher](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/misc/1908299)**. See also **[Keesing's Record of World Events](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/misc/3913703)** for political and historical topics.

Browse our [**subject research guides**](http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/content/subject-guides).

[More details on finding and using subject encyclopedias and other background sources.](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/content.php?pid=440161&sid=3603595#12934688)

## Develop Your Topic

**Test Your Topic**

**Test the main concepts or keywords** in your topic **by looking them up** in the appropriate background sources or **by using them as search terms** in the [Cornell Library Catalog](https://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/) and in periodical databases.

If you are finding too much information and too many sources, narrow your topic by using the **and** operator: beer and health and college students, for example.

Finding too little information may indicate that you need to broaden your topic. For example, look for information on students, rather than college students. Link synonymous search terms with or: alcoholic beverages or beer or wine or liquor. Use truncation (i.e., alcohol\*) with search terms to broaden the search and increases the number of items you find.

## Using Encyclopedia Articles and Dictionaries to Understand a Topic

**Finding Background Information and Context:**

After you identify your research topic and some keywords that describe it, find and read articles in subject encyclopedias, dictionaries, and handbooks. These articles will help you understand the context (historical, cultural, disciplinary) of your topic. They are the foundation supporting further research. The most common background sources are **subject encyclopedias and dictionaries** from our print and online reference collection. **Class textbooks** also provide definitions of terms and background information.

**HOW TO FIND ENCYCLOPEDIAS AND DICTIONARIES**  
  
Use the Advanced search in [**our Catalog**](https://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/). Enter (encyclopedia dictionary) all in Title AND your topic in All Fields

Use our [**Online Encyclopedias guide**](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/encyclopedias) to locate reliable articles on your topic.

Browse the [**Dictionaries and Encyclopedias section**](https://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/databases/subject/Dictionaries%20and%20Encyclopedias) of [**Databases**](https://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/databases)

Search[**Reference Universe**](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/misc/5421209)

[**Ask a reference librarian**](http://www.library.cornell.edu/ask) to suggest appropriate titles.

Browse our [**Subject Guides**](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/libguides/home).

**Use the**[**Cornell Library Catalog**](http://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/) to find the locations and call numbers of millions of Cornell books (as well as lots of video, audio, microform, map, serial, and rare titles).

### ****Library of Congress Call Numbers****

We use Library of Congress call numbers to shelve our books and bound periodicals. For a brief introduction, ask at reference for our **Library of Congress Classification** handout or see this web site: [Library of Congress Classification Outline](http://www.loc.gov/catdir/cpso/lcco/).

**To find books outside Cornell, use [BorrowDirect](https://www.library.cornell.edu/services/request/borrow-direct) or [OCLC WorldCat](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/firs/apx4196).**

[**BorrowDirect**](https://www.library.cornell.edu/services/request/borrow-direct) is the combined online catalogs of the eight Ivy libraries plus MIT, Chicago, and Johns Hopkins. Bonus: you can order the book you want directly from BorrowDirect (provided it is not available to borrow at Cornell). Your book will be delivered to the library you choose at Cornell in four business days or less. Check at a reference desk for further information and assistance.

[**OCLC WorldCat**](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/firs/apx4196)is the combined online catalogs of tens of thousands of libraries around the world. You can request books in WorldCat that are not available through either Cornell or BorrowDirect by using our **free**[**interlibrary loan service**](https://www.library.cornell.edu/services/request/interlibrary-loan).

**TIP: EXPLOIT BIBLIOGRAPHIES**

* Read the background information and note any useful sources (books, journals, magazines, etc.) listed in the bibliography at the end of the encyclopedia article or dictionary entry. The sources cited in the bibliography are good starting points for further research.
* Look up these sources in our catalogs and periodical databases. Check the subject headings listed in the subject field of the online record for these books and articles. Then do subject searches using those subject headings to locate additional titles.
* Remember that many of the books and articles you find will themselves have bibliographies. Check these bibliographies for additional useful resources for your research.

By using this technique of routinely following up on sources cited in bibliographies, you can generate a surprisingly large number of books and articles on your topic in a relatively short time.

valuating the authority, usefulness, and reliability of the information you find is a crucial step in the process of library research. The questions you ask about books, periodical articles, multimedia titles, or Web pages are similar whether you're looking at a citation to the item, a physical item in hand, or an electronic version on a computer.

**ALL SOURCES:**

[**Critically Analyzing Information Sources**](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/criticallyanalyzing) lists some of the questions you should ask when you consider the appropriateness of a particular book, article, media resource, or Web site for your research.

**BOOKS:**

Use **book reviews** to gather critical information about books. Three quick ways to access them online [Cornell users only]:

* [**Articles & Full Text link**](http://cornell.summon.serialssolutions.com/) [all dates; links to full-text reviews]
* [**ProQuest Research Library.**](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/umip/aqg6345) [1986- ; some full-text reviews]
* [**Book Review Digest.**](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/firs/apw7442) [1983- ; excerpts from some reviews]
* [**Bowker's Books in Print.**](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/misc/3987162) [in-print books from any year; full text of short reviews available]

More sources for book reviews --> [**Book Reviews: A Finding Guide**.](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/bookreviews)

**PERIODICALS:**

[**Distinguishing Scholarly from Other Periodicals**](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/scholarlyjournals) shows how to **evaluate periodicals** by looking at their format, intended audience, and appearance.

**Watch short videos:** [Recognizing scholarly journals](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDGJ2CYfY9A)    [Identifying substantive news sources](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAiJL5B5esM)

**WEB SITES:**

[Evaluating Web Pages: Questions to Ask & Strategies for Getting the Answers](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html) is an excellent guide from UC Berkeley.

[Five Criteria for Evaluating Web Sites](http://guides.library.cornell.edu/evaluating_Web_pages) is a brief table of tips and questions to ask.

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# Introduction to Research

Research needs and requirements vary with each assignment, project or paper. Although there is no single "right" way to conduct research, certain methods and skills can make your research efforts more efficient and effective.

If you have questions or can't find what you need, [ask a librarian.](https://www.library.cornell.edu/ask)

### ON THIS PAGE

* [Choosing and developing a research topic](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction#1Choosinganddevelopingaresearchtopic-1Ch)
* [Finding books, articles and other materials](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction#1Choosinganddevelopingaresearchtopic-2Fi)
* [Evaluating resources](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction#2Findingbooks,articles,andothermater)
* [Citing sources](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction#3Evaluatingresources-4Citingsources4Citi)

## Choosing and developing a research topic

### Suggestions for finding a topic

* Discuss your ideas with your course instructor.
* Discuss your ideas with a reference librarian.
* Look over the index and the article titles in a specialized encyclopedia that covers a relevant subject area or discipline.

### Identifying a topic

State your topic idea as a question. For example, if you are interested in finding out about Title IX (Title Nine) and women athletes in college athletic programs, you might pose the question, "How did Title IX impact women athletes in college athletic programs?"

Identify the main concepts or keywords in your question. These are potential search terms. In this case they are "title ix," "women," "athletes," and "college athletic programs".

### Testing the topic

Before you commit to a specific topic for your research, do a scan to make sure that your topic isn't completely covered in another paper; at the same time ensure that there is enough information available to complete the project. This can be particularly important if you are planning on using data in your research. If in doubt, ask your professor.

If you are finding too much information and too many sources, narrow your topic. For example: "women and athletes and college and athletics".

Finding too little information may indicate that you need to broaden your topic by using a more general term or terms in your search.

### Finding background information

Once you have identified the main topic and keywords for your research, find one or more sources of background information to read. These sources will help you understand the broader context of your research and tell you in general terms what is known about your topic. They will give you an idea of how much and what kind of information is available on a given topic.

Encyclopedias and dictionaries: You can find subject-specific encyclopedias and dictionaries by using the [Library Catalog](http://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/) or by asking a reference librarian. You may wish to also consult [Reference Universe](http://resolver.library.cornell.edu/misc/5421209) Online, [Wikipedia](http://www.wikipedia.org/), or our list of [Dictionaries and Encyclopedias](http://erms.library.cornell.edu/search~S4/m?Dictionaries).

Exploit bibliographies: Often there are scholarly articles that give an overview of research in specific fields (a review of the literature). The sources cited in the bibliography are good starting points for further research.

Look up these sources in the [Library Catalog](http://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/). Check the subject headings listed in the subject field of the online record for these books and journals. Then do subject searches using those subject headings to locate additional titles.

[Top](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction#top)

## Finding books, articles, and other materials

### How do I find it?

Find [books, music, video and audio materials](https://www.library.cornell.edu/help/catalog)  
Find [articles, databases, images](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction/articles)  
Find [dissertations](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction/dissertations)

### Searching the Library Catalog

Find library materials such as books, music, videos, articles and audio recordings via the [Library Catalog](http://newcatalog.library.cornell.edu/). For more information on how to search using the Library Catalog see these [help pages](http://www.oclc.org/worldcat/help/en/search/default.htm).

### What if Cornell doesn't have it?

If Cornell does not own the item you need, you can:

* Request it from another library to be delivered to you via [Borrow Direct](https://www.library.cornell.edu/services/requests/borrow-direct) or [Interlibrary Loan](https://www.library.cornell.edu/services/requests/interlibrary-loan).
* [Request that the Library purchase a copy](https://www.library.cornell.edu/services/recommend).

### What is "Get it!"?

The Get it! Cornell link connects to the full-text of articles in places like Google Scholar or databases that only have article abstracts. (If you are off campus be sure to be logged in Kerberos with your NetID and password, or use [PassKey](https://confluence.cornell.edu/display/CULLABS/Passkey+Bookmarklet).)

Sometimes a direct link to full-text is not available on the Get it! Cornell page. In those cases, click the links to search the Library Catalog by ISSN or ISBN (preferred) or by title and determine whether we own or have access to the item, either online through another source or in print (hardcopy).

If the Library does not own or have access to the item you need, use the link on the Get it! Cornell page to request it through Interlibrary Loan or Document Delivery.

[Top](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction#top)

## Evaluating resources

When using a book, article, report, or Web site for your research, it is important to gauge how reliable the source is.

### Initial appraisal

* Author or creator: What are the author's credentials (educational background, past writing, experience) in this area? Have you seen the author's name cited in other sources or bibliographies? Respected authors are cited frequently by other scholars. For this reason, always note names that appear in many different sources.
* Year of publication: Is the source current or out of date for your topic? Topic areas of continuing and rapid development, such as the sciences, demand more current information. Topics in the humanities often require material that was written many years ago.
* Edition: Is this a first edition? Later editions indicate a source has been revised and updated. Multiple printings or editions may indicate that the work has become a standard source in the area and is reliable.
* Publisher: Is it a university press or a large reputable publisher?

### Content analysis

**Intentions:** Read the preface (book) or abstract (article) to determine the author's intentions. Scan the table of contents and the index to get a broad overview of the material covered. Note whether bibliographies are included.

**Intended audience:** What type of audience is the author addressing? Is this source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for your needs?

**Objective reasoning:**

* Is the information fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion.
* Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence?
* Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-rousing words or bias?

**Coverage:**

* Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? You should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.
* Is the material primary or secondary in nature? Primary sources are the raw material of the research process; secondary sources are based on primary sources.

**Writing style:** Is the publication organized logically? Are the main points clearly presented? Do you find the text easy to read? Is the author repetitive?

**Evaluative reviews (books):**

* Locate critical reviews of books in a reviewing source, such as [Book Review Digest](http://cornell.worldcat.org/oclc/3173080). Is the book considered a valuable contribution to the field? Does the reviewer mention other books that might be better? If so, locate these sources.
* Do the various reviewers agree on the value or attributes of the book, or has it aroused controversy among the critics?

### Evaluating Web resources

#### Purpose

Occasionally, Web sites pretending to be objective have a hidden agenda and may be trying to persuade, promote, or sell something.

* What is the purpose or motive for the site? (e.g., educational, commercial, entertainment, promotional)
* Is the site trying to sell you something?
* How easy is it to differentiate advertisement from content?
* Based on your knowledge, is the information factual, opinion, propaganda, et cetera?
* Who is the intended audience, and how is this reflected in the organization and presentation of the site?

#### Authority

* Is the author identifiable? Look for links that say "Who We Are," "About This Site" or something similar.
* Is there contact information for the author? (e.g., e-mail address, mailing address, phone number)
* What is the author's background? (e.g., experience, credentials, occupation, whether he or she has written other publications on the topic)
* Does the author cite his or her sources?
* Is this site linked to often by other sites?
* Do links on this site lead to other reputable sites?
* Are there spelling errors or incorrect use of grammar?
* What domain does the site belong to? (e.g., .edu, .gov, .com, .net, .org)?

#### Reliability

The dependability of a Web site is important if it is going to be cited as a source in other works or recommended for use by others.

* Do most of the links on the page work?
* From your evaluation of currency and authority, do you think the site will be there next time you visit it?

#### Currency

* When was site last updated or revised? If you cannot find a date on the page, type **javascript:alert(document.lastModified)** in the address bar and hit **Enter**. A pop-up window will display the date and time when the page was last updated.
* How often is the site updated?
* Do the links on the site work?

#### Coverage

* What information is included or omitted?
* Is the page completed or under construction?
* [See also: University of California Berkeley's guide.](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/FindInfo.html)

### Distinguishing scholarly from non-scholarly periodicals (articles and papers):

Journals and magazines are important sources for up-to-date information in all disciplines. In this guide we have divided periodical literature into four categories:

* Scholarly
* Substantive news or general interest
* Popular
* Sensational

#### Scholarly

* Scholarly journals generally have a sober, serious look. They often contain many graphs and charts but few glossy pages or exciting pictures.
* Scholarly journals always cite their sources in the form of footnotes or bibliographies.
* Articles are written by a scholar or someone who has done research in the field.
* The language of scholarly journals is that of the discipline covered. It assumes some scholarly background on the part of the reader.
* The main purpose of a scholarly journal is to report on original research or experimentation to make the information available to the rest of the scholarly world.
* Examples of scholarly journals: American Economic Review, Archives of Sexual Behavior, JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association, Modern Fiction Studies

#### Substantive news or general interest

* These periodicals may be quite attractive in appearance. Some are in newspaper format. Articles are often heavily illustrated and generally contain photographs.
* News and general interest periodicals sometimes cite sources, a scholar, or a freelance writer.
* The language of these publications is geared to any educated audience. There is no special training assumed, only interest and a certain level of intelligence.
* They are generally published by commercial enterprises or individuals, although some come from professional organizations.
* The main purpose of periodicals in this category is to provide general information to a broad audience of concerned citizens.
* Examples of substantive news or general-interest periodicals: The Economist, National Geographic, The New York Times, Scientific American

#### Popular

* Popular periodicals come in many formats, although they are often somewhat slick and attractive in appearance and have many graphics.
* These publications rarely, if ever, cite sources. Information published in such journals is often second- or third-hand, and the original source is sometimes obscured.
* Articles are usually very short, written in simple language, and designed to meet a minimal education level. There is generally little depth to the content of these articles.
* Articles are written by staff members or freelance writers.
* The main purpose of popular periodicals is to entertain the reader, sell products (their own or their advertisers'), and/or promote a viewpoint.
* Examples of popular periodicals: Ebony, Parents, People, Reader's Digest, Sports Illustrated, Time, Vogue

#### Sensational

* Sensational periodicals come in a variety of styles but often use a newspaper format.
* The language is elementary and occasionally inflammatory or sensational. They assume a certain gullibility in their audience.
* The main purpose of sensational magazines seems to be to arouse curiosity and cater to popular superstitions. They often do so with flashy headlines designed to astonish (e.g., "Half-man Half-woman Makes Self Pregnant").
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[Top](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction#top)

## Citing sources

When writing a research paper, it is important to cite the sources you used in a way such that a reader could find them.

These are the most common formats for citing sources. If you are unsure what style to use, ask your professor.

* [APA](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/): American Psychological Association
* [MLA](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/): Modern Language Association
* [Chicago Manual of Style](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/contents.html)

### Other resources

* [Annotated bibliography tutorial](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/citation/tutorial)
* [Citation management software:](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/citation) This software will format your bibliography and footnotes for you!
* [Code of Academic Integrity](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/citation/code)

## Evaluating resources

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### Initial appraisal

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* Year of publication: Is the source current or out of date for your topic? Topic areas of continuing and rapid development, such as the sciences, demand more current information. Topics in the humanities often require material that was written many years ago.
* Edition: Is this a first edition? Later editions indicate a source has been revised and updated. Multiple printings or editions may indicate that the work has become a standard source in the area and is reliable.
* Publisher: Is it a university press or a large reputable publisher?

### Content analysis

**Intentions:** Read the preface (book) or abstract (article) to determine the author's intentions. Scan the table of contents and the index to get a broad overview of the material covered. Note whether bibliographies are included.

**Intended audience:** What type of audience is the author addressing? Is this source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for your needs?

**Objective reasoning:**

* Is the information fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion.
* Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence?
* Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-rousing words or bias?

**Coverage:**

* Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? You should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.
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* Based on your knowledge, is the information factual, opinion, propaganda, et cetera?
* Who is the intended audience, and how is this reflected in the organization and presentation of the site?

#### Authority

* Is the author identifiable? Look for links that say "Who We Are," "About This Site" or something similar.
* Is there contact information for the author? (e.g., e-mail address, mailing address, phone number)
* What is the author's background? (e.g., experience, credentials, occupation, whether he or she has written other publications on the topic)
* Does the author cite his or her sources?
* Is this site linked to often by other sites?
* Do links on this site lead to other reputable sites?
* Are there spelling errors or incorrect use of grammar?
* What domain does the site belong to? (e.g., .edu, .gov, .com, .net, .org)?

#### Reliability

The dependability of a Web site is important if it is going to be cited as a source in other works or recommended for use by others.

* Do most of the links on the page work?
* From your evaluation of currency and authority, do you think the site will be there next time you visit it?

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* Sensational

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* Scholarly journals generally have a sober, serious look. They often contain many graphs and charts but few glossy pages or exciting pictures.
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* The language of scholarly journals is that of the discipline covered. It assumes some scholarly background on the part of the reader.
* The main purpose of a scholarly journal is to report on original research or experimentation to make the information available to the rest of the scholarly world.
* Examples of scholarly journals: American Economic Review, Archives of Sexual Behavior, JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association, Modern Fiction Studies

#### Substantive news or general interest

* These periodicals may be quite attractive in appearance. Some are in newspaper format. Articles are often heavily illustrated and generally contain photographs.
* News and general interest periodicals sometimes cite sources, a scholar, or a freelance writer.
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* They are generally published by commercial enterprises or individuals, although some come from professional organizations.
* The main purpose of periodicals in this category is to provide general information to a broad audience of concerned citizens.
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* Articles are usually very short, written in simple language, and designed to meet a minimal education level. There is generally little depth to the content of these articles.
* Articles are written by staff members or freelance writers.
* The main purpose of popular periodicals is to entertain the reader, sell products (their own or their advertisers'), and/or promote a viewpoint.
* Examples of popular periodicals: Ebony, Parents, People, Reader's Digest, Sports Illustrated, Time, Vogue

#### Sensational

* Sensational periodicals come in a variety of styles but often use a newspaper format.
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* Examples of sensational periodicals: The Globe, The National Enquirer, The Star, Weekly World News

[Top](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/introduction#top)

## Citing sources

When writing a research paper, it is important to cite the sources you used in a way such that a reader could find them.

These are the most common formats for citing sources. If you are unsure what style to use, ask your professor.

* [APA](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/): American Psychological Association
* [MLA](https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/): Modern Language Association
* [Chicago Manual of Style](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/contents.html)

### Other resources

* [Annotated bibliography tutorial](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/citation/tutorial)
* [Citation management software:](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/citation) This software will format your bibliography and footnotes for you!
* [Code of Academic Integrity](https://www.library.cornell.edu/research/citation/code)

CiteUlike CiteULike http://www.citeulike.org/ CiteULike is a free service for managing and discovering scholarly references. You can easily store references you find online, discover new articles and resources, share references with your peers, find out whose reading what you're reading and store and search your PDFs. There is also an automated article recommendations feature.