**[Introduction to Research](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/research-strategy-guide" \o "Go to guide main page): Choosing Your Research Topic**

**Identify Your Topic**

Selecting a topic is the first step. If the choice is up to you, pick a topic that interests you. Think broadly about your topic and do some preliminary research by consulting subject encyclopedias, dictionaries or handbooks. You can also check appropriate current periodicals or browse shelves of books classed in subject areas to get ideas on research topics.

You will probably have to narrow your topic since most topics are too broad for a research paper although at times your topic could be too specific and in this case, you might need to broaden your focus.

**Develop Your Topic**

Once you have identified your topic:

* State the topic in the form of a specific statement or question.
* Identify the main concepts, terms and keywords that describe your topic.
* Start making a list of words to describe your topic. Use dictionaries and thesauri to define other terms to build a useful list of terms. These terms will become the keywords for searching catalogues, indexes, and databases for information about your subject.

For example:

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| Topic: What are the behavioural effects of TV violence on children? | |
| Main concepts: | television, violence, children, behavioural effects |
| Secondary concepts: | television, TV violence, aggression, aggressive, cruelty child, adolescents, juvenile, minor acting out, conduct |

Once you have identified key terms for your topic, you are ready to shape your strategy for searching catalogues, indexes and databases.

To visually spell out the concepts and relationships among the ideas, check out these [examples of concept tables](http://library.queensu.ca/files/concepttables.pdf). (Virginia Tech University Libraries)

**Form a Search Strategy**

For a description of how to formulate a search strategy, go to: [Using Boolean Operators and Parentheses](http://library.usask.ca/howto/guides/srcstratslide4.php) guide. (University of Saskatchewan Library)

**Finding Background Information**

Once you have identified the main topic and keywords for your research, the next step is to find sources of background information. This is especially important if you are unfamiliar with the subject or not sure how to approach your topic. Background information can be found in dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanacs and bibliographies and will provide:

* A broad overview of the subject
* Definitions of the topic
* An introduction to key issues
* Names of people who are authorities in the field
* Major dates and events
* Bibliographical references

**Encyclopedias and Dictionaries**

Dictionaries and encyclopedias are a great place to start your research as they are helpful for finding definitions, overviews, background information and basic facts. They may be general or subject specific, in print or online and may provide bibliographical references.

**General Encyclopedias**

General encyclopedias provide information on many topics – some will be more in depth than others but any general encyclopedia will give you information on your chosen subject area. Some frequently used online encyclopedias are: the [Encyclopedia Britannica](http://library.queensu.ca/research/databases/record/2689) and the [Canadian Encyclopedia](http://library.queensu.ca/research/databases/record/2937).

**Subject Specific Encyclopedias**

Unlike general encyclopedias which cover a wide range of topics, subject specific encyclopedias focus on a particular subject area. They are usually written by experts in the field and include comprehensive bibliographies of important resources. A frequently used online subject specific encyclopedia is [Oxford Reference Online](http://library.queensu.ca/research/databases/record/2924).

To locate subject specific encyclopedias, you can search QCAT, go to [Dictionaries and Encyclopedias](http://library.queensu.ca/research/databases/subject/dictionaries-and-encyclopedias) for a list of online encyclopedias or check the dictionaries/encyclopedia sections of our [Research by Subject](http://library.queensu.ca/research/subjects) guides.

**Searching the Library Catalogue for Subject Specific Resources**

Do a subject heading search in QCAT for your subject followed by the word “encyclopedias” or the older subject heading “dictionaries”. For example:

sociology encyclopedias  
sociology dictionaries

Another method is to do a keyword Boolean search. For example:

(encyclopedias or dictionaries) and women  
(encyclopedias or dictionaries) and “world war II”

For an overview of a person’s life and career, check biographical dictionaries, which can present brief information or a more detailed portrayal with bibliographical references. For more information, go to the [Biographical Resources](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/biography) subject guide.

**Bibliographies**

Bibliographies are invaluable resources for researchers as they list the literature of a subject. You can find bibliographies in textbooks, books, journal articles, to name a few. Found at the end of the publication, bibliographies can save you hours of research as they can lead you to relevant resources for your research.

**Finding Bibliographies Using the Library Catalogue**

Do a subject heading search in QCAT for your subject followed by the word “bibliography”. For example:

great britain history bibliography  
world war II, 1939-1945 bibliography

You can also add the word “bibliography” to a keyword search.

**Locating Resources**

Before starting your research, think about what type of information you need for this research. Information can come from anywhere - books, journals, magazines, newspapers, encyclopedias, web pages, government documents to name a few.

You need to be aware of the type and source of information you gather and who the intended audience is since not all information you find will be correct, accurate or appropriate for your paper. See our [Evaluating Sources](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/research-strategy-guide/evaluating-source) guide to help you decide whether the information found is appropriate for your needs.

Finding resources:

* [Books](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/introduction-research/locating-resources/finding-books)
* [Articles](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/introduction-research/locating-resources/finding-articles)
* [Websites](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/introduction-research/locating-resources/finding-websites)

**Finding Articles**

Articles are important in your research. They are excellent for detailed and current information on a topic. These articles are from publications that are printed "periodically" in daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly or irregular intervals. Types of periodicals include journals, magazines, yearbooks, and newspapers.

Use periodical/article indexes to find citations to articles in periodical publications. They are often subject-oriented and list author, title, name of periodical, volume, pages and date of publication in entries called bibliographic citations.

Choose appropriate indexes or databases by checking [Browse Databases by Subject](http://library.queensu.ca/research/databases/) or [Research by Subject](http://library.queensu.ca/research/subjects) for a guide as to what indexes would be best for your field of study. If you are unsure as to what index you should use for your particular topic, ask at the [Research Help Desk](http://library.queensu.ca/inforef/hours/index.html).

Apply the same keyword strategies in electronic indexes that were successful in finding books. For an overview of searching electronic databases, go to the guide [Using Boolean Operators](http://library.usask.ca/howto/guides/srcstratslide4.php).

Before searching, note the time coverage and the content of the electronic index (some are full text, others have only citations and some have citations and abstracts).

Print indexes are still valuable resources. They often cover more years than electronic indexes, some going back to the 19th century. Note time coverage and content of the print index and other information such as a guide to any abbreviations used in the index.

Remember to record the complete article citation:

* **Author**
* **Article title**
* **Journal or magazine title**
* **Volume number of the journal or magazine**
* **Date of publication**
* **Page numbers**
* **Section or column number (for newspaper citations)**

Search QCAT to see if Queen's Library has a specific journal. After typing in the title in the search box, select **Journal Exact** in the drop-down menu.

Make sure that Queen's has the issue that you need. Periodicals are available in many different formats: loose issues, bound paper volumes, microfilm, and/or electronic

## Finding Websites

The Web has a wealth of information from academic, public, commercial and personal sites. However it is important to remember that anyone can publish anything on the Web so it is critical to evaluate the information you find.

### Search Techniques

Before you begin your search, think about your topic and search terms. Identify key concepts and then brainstorm for related words.

There are various web search tools that you can use but the most popular one to use is Google. The challenge to using Google as well as other search tools is to find relevant websites. Fortunately most web search tools have a help page so check them out if you are not getting the best results and want to improve your searching techniques.

### Google

Typing keywords into Google will usually give you thousands of hits. Consider using Google’s [Advanced Search](http://www.google.com/advanced_search) to construct a more complex and focused search. Advanced Search also allows you to limit your search by language, region, file format, domain to name a few.

For more information on search, go to Google’s [search help](http://support.google.com/websearch/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=136861) pages.

Also consider searching [Google Scholar](http://library.queensu.ca/research/databases/record/2998), which enables you to search specifically for scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, abstracts and technical reports. Many of the resources found in Google Scholar are available free on the Web or through the Library’s paid subscriptions. Search Google Scholar through a Queen’s NetID login in order to see the full text of books, articles, etc.

Check out the recommended websites by subject by going to our [Research by Subject](http://library.queensu.ca/research/subjects) guides.

Go to [Search the Web](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/search-web) for suggested search engines, subject directories and meta-engines and for more information about searching the Web.

### Evaluating Websites

Anyone can create a webpage so it is particularly important to analyze and assess information that you find on the Web before using it in a research paper. Go to [Evaluating Web Sources](http://library.queensu.ca/inforef/tutorials/qcat/evalint.htm) for a checklist of things to consider when analyzing a web page.

## Evaluating Sources

Evaluating your sources is a crucial step of the research process. You need to evaluate carefully each source to determine its appropriateness and quality.

Check our [Evaluating Sources Checklist](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/research-strategy-guide/evaluating-sources/checklist) for criteria used to judge information sources and our [Scholarly and Popular Resources](http://library.queensu.ca/research/guide/scholarly-popular) page to distinguish between scholarly and popular publications.

It is particularly important to evaluation information that you find on the Web. Because there are no rules and anyone can post a page on the Web, you will have to determine whether the web site is of value. Go to [Evaluating Web Sources](http://library.queensu.ca/inforef/tutorials/qcat/evalint.htm) for specific criteria used to analyze websites.

Check our [Distinguishing Scholarly Journals from Other Periodicals](http://library.queensu.ca/inforef/tutorials/qcat/qeval.htm) page in order to evaluate periodicals by looking at their content, purpose, and intended audience.

**Characteristics of Scholarly and Popular Resources**

Scholarly sources are authoritative, because they are

* Written by experts in a field of study
* The result of research
* Reviewed and evaluated by other subject experts
* Intended for an academic audience (i.e. researchers, professors, and students)

Popular sources are less credible, because they are

* Written by authors who are not experts in the field
* Not reviewed and evaluated by experts in the field
* Intended for the general public
* Informal in tone and scope

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|  | **Scholarly Publications** | **Popular Publications** |
| **Appearance** | simple layout with serious appearance and dense text - main attraction is the articles | colourful, glossy, photos, illustrations, advertisements |
| **Audience** | scholars, researchers, students and well-educated public | general public |
| **Authors** | scholars, professional practitioners | journalists, professional and amateur writers who lack subject expertise |
| **Content** | in depth analysis or extensive overview of a topic | simple discussions of news, entertainment, or other popular subjects |
| **Review Process** | works published after review by credible scholars in the discipline (peer review) | works reviewed by publication editors or purchased |
| **Research Documentation** | footnotes and bibliographies cite the author's research | information sources are rarely cited |
| **Language** | technical language in the specialised vocabulary of the discipline covered | simple, non-technical language |
| **Purpose/Intent** | Present cutting-edge research specific to the field | to inform or entertain the reader, sell products, and/or promote a viewpoint |
| **Examples** | Canadian Journal of Political Science, Shakespeare Quarterly, French Historical Studies | Newsweek, Sports Illustrated, Vogue, People |