



## Planning Your Research Choosing and Defining Your Topic



A **Research Strategy** is an action plan that allows you to effectively and successfully guide your research efforts. Similar to following a map when driving to a new destination, your research plan will enable you to find needed information more quickly and efficiently.

1. List your topic here:
2. List a few ideas indicating information you already know about this topic:

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▪  
▪

▪  
▪  
▪

### **SAMPLE:**

1. List your topic here: **School Violence**
2. List a few ideas indicating information you already know about this topic:
  - **Littleton, Colorado - Columbine High School**
  - **Video games and violent music have been blamed for influencing violence**
  - **Perpetrators of school violence are mostly male**
  - **Perpetrators are often depressed/loners/social outcasts**
  - **Some schools have adopted use of metal detectors to deter violence**
  - **Schools are developing and practicing "intruder" drills/safety plans in cooperation with police**

3. Develop several specific, researchable questions that you will likely attempt to answer in the process of researching your larger topic/issue/ problem/question. Use the words **who, what, when, where, why, how, what if**, and **will** to begin your questions.

\_\_\_\_\_ a.  
\_\_\_\_\_ b.  
\_\_\_\_\_ c.  
\_\_\_\_\_ d.  
\_\_\_\_\_ e.  
\_\_\_\_\_ f.  
\_\_\_\_\_ g.  
\_\_\_\_\_ h.

4. Organizing your questions into categories will help you to group information related to your topic into subtopics. Write each category in the blank provided next to each question you wrote above. Examples of categories are provided below, but you may need to add a few of your own.

Causes  
Effects  
History  
Costs

Methods  
Location  
Conditions  
People

Future  
Responsibility  
Laws  
Solutions

**SAMPLE: School Violence**

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| <u>Solutions</u>      | a. How can schools better reach out to violent students?                      |
| <u>Solutions</u>      | b. What programs in schools have already worked to help curb school violence? |
| <u>Methods</u>        | c. What kinds of violence are most prevalent in schools?                      |
| <u>Conditions</u>     | d. Why do incidents of school violence seem to be on the rise?                |
| <u>People</u>         | e. Who seem to be the main perpetrators of violence in schools?               |
| <u>Effects</u>        | f. What are penalties for committing acts of violence in schools?             |
| <u>Causes</u>         | g. What causes students to be violent?  |
| <u>Responsibility</u> | h. Who is responsible for violent children?                                   |
| <u>Effects</u>        | i. How do violent students affect other students?                             |

5. Considering the information you've compiled above, transform your topic into a researchable question or problem:

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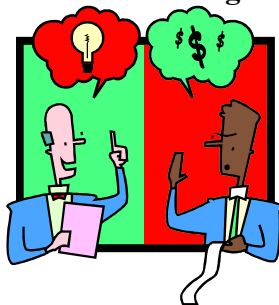
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**SAMPLE:**

Through which methods can parents, school personnel, and students most effectively deter acts of school violence?

**\*\*Another good idea:** Use the categories with which you labeled your questions as subheadings on an outline to organize your ideas for a research paper!

## Planning Your Research - Establishing Background Knowledge



One way to become more familiar with the issues associated with your topic is by **establishing some background knowledge**. Once you read a little bit of information about your topic, you will start to see some of the main vocabulary that is associated with your issue, as well as some of the main arguments and controversies surrounding your issue.

There are several routes you can take to establish background information:

1. Use an Encyclopedia – Encyclopedias are general reference materials and are meant to provide more basic, general information about a topic. Additionally, encyclopedia articles will often pinpoint other, more narrow, subject areas on which you can focus your research
2. Move from General to Specific – If you can't find a general encyclopedia entry on your topic, try a subject encyclopedia from the reference section. Look at the table of contents. How does it break your topic down into subtopics? Read one chapter or article from this source. What are the main keywords, issues, vocabulary associated with your topic?

### SUGGESTED WUHS REFERENCE SOURCES:

Information Plus Series (many different topics throughout ref. section)  
Annual Editions (many different topics throughout ref. section)  
CQ Researcher  
Taking Sides  
Current Controversies

3. Use the Online Subscription Database SIRS – SIRS has an excellent subject directory. Other online databases do as well. If you type your topic as a Subject Search, SIRS will bring up your subject, as well as subdivisions of your topic. If your topic has subdivisions, note how SIRS has subdivided that topic. In what ways can your topic be narrowed or broadened? Click on a SIRS subject heading and find one good article that will provide background knowledge on your topic.

## Keyword versus Subject Searching

### Keyword and Subject Searching:

Whether you are searching the library's online catalog for books or an online subscription database for articles, you can either conduct a keyword or a subject search. There is an important distinction between the two types of searches.



### Keyword Searching:

Keyword Searching is often the best way to **START** your research process. Often you don't know the official subject heading term for a concept, but starting with a keyword search can help you to eventually determine the best subject headings for your topic. In a keyword search, the computer simply looks for your term in essentially any part of a bibliographic record, be it the author field, the title field, or the full text of the summary or article. If the computer matches your search term in a record, that source will be displayed as one of your results.

A keyword search is the most broad and flexible type of search. You can search with just one keyword for a more general search or combine keywords with Boolean operators (and, or, not) to narrow your results. Caution: Due to their very nature, keyword searches will often result in too many, too few, or irrelevant results. You may need to change your strategy depending on what you get:

#### Too many results?

- Try using a narrower term [ie: instead of **drugs** try *club drugs*]
- Add concepts to your original keyword using AND [ie: *teens and club drugs*]

#### Too few results?

- Try using a broader term [ie: instead of **steroids** try *performance-enhancing drugs*]
- Combine similar terms using OR [ie: *(teens or adolescents or youth) and performance-enhancing drugs*]

#### Irrelevant results?

- You may not be using the right term for your search, your terms are too general or vague, or perhaps one of your terms is creating a problem.
- Try adding the Boolean term NOT to a search to eliminate a problem term [ie: *drugs not prescription*]

Once you have conducted a keyword search, if you have found a few good, relevant results, try to find the *descriptors* or *subject headings* for that article. Subject headings, sometimes called descriptors, are official terms that are used to describe the content of an item. Once you know which subject heading is officially used to describe your topic, you can use that term to conduct a subject search.

## Subject Searching:



Once you can determine one or more official subject headings for your topic, you can conduct a Subject Search. A Subject Search will often bring you fewer but more relevant results related to your topic. Here's why: In a subject search, the computer searches only the subject heading field of a bibliographic record, which is the place where official terms that describe what a work is about get entered. Since the computer is only searching for your term in one field, as opposed to many fields in a keyword search, you will get fewer results. The advantage of a subject search, however, is that the results you get will be ABOUT your topic, so your results will be much more relevant.

**While beginning your search with a keyword search is a good strategy, there are definite advantages to subject searching.**

Many online databases have a subject directory and categorize their articles based on subject headings. The WUHS online catalog uses subject headings as well. Organizing by subject ensures that all works about a topic or concept can be found under the exact same term. This consistency allows a searcher to find all available articles on a topic under the same subject heading, eliminating the need to conduct multiple searches.

**For example:** I need to find books and articles about stars for my astronomy class. Below I've shown 5 of the 38 total results I found with this particular online catalog search using the term **Stars** in a KEYWORD SEARCH:

**Keyword search: Stars**

**Total Results: 38**

**Results List:**

Encyclopedia of Film Stars Jarvis, Douglas	R 791.43 Jar
Great Country Music Stars Gray, Andy	780.9 Gra
Who's Who in Sports All * Stars 1997-98	920 Who
Anvil of Stars Bear, Greg	PA FIC BEA
The Great Atlas of the Stars Brunier, Serge	R 523.8 Bru

Of the five results shown, four of the results are irrelevant. Because I conducted a keyword search, the computer brought up as a result any book that included the term **Stars**, regardless of where it appeared in the bibliographic record. Only the last one, *The Great Atlas of the Stars* is promising, discussing stars as a concept related to astronomy. Once I looked at the subject headings for this book, I found that **Stars** is indeed an official subject heading for my astronomy concept. Thus, I decided to use **Stars** in my search again, but this time in a SUBJECT SEARCH:

**Subject search: Stars**

**Total Results: 7**

**Results List:**

Stars	523.8 Sta
In Quest of Quasars: An Introduction to Stars and Starlike Objects Bova, Ben	523 Bov
Starlight: What it Tells About the Stars Page, Thornton	523.8 Pag
The Stars Kruse, Willy	523.8 Kru
The Great Atlas of the Stars Brunier, Serge	R 523.8 Bru

Notice the difference in the two searches. With a subject search using **Stars**, I found fewer results, but my results this time were much more relevant; the computer only brought up those books that have the term **Stars** listed as a subject heading, which means that each of these books is about stars as a concept related to astronomy. Now I don't have to waste my time sifting through a lot of irrelevant materials to get to the ones that are relevant. With one simple subject search, I accomplished my goal.

## Planning Your Research - Identifying Keywords

When searching for and gathering information on a topic, the right combination of keywords can save a searcher a lot of time. If the searcher hits on the right combination, he/she should more quickly find good articles that more accurately relate to his/her search topic. Look at the following question sample:

**Should baseball players in the Major League be permitted to use steroids?**



1. In order to get good results, a searcher will first need to identify the important keywords related to the topic:

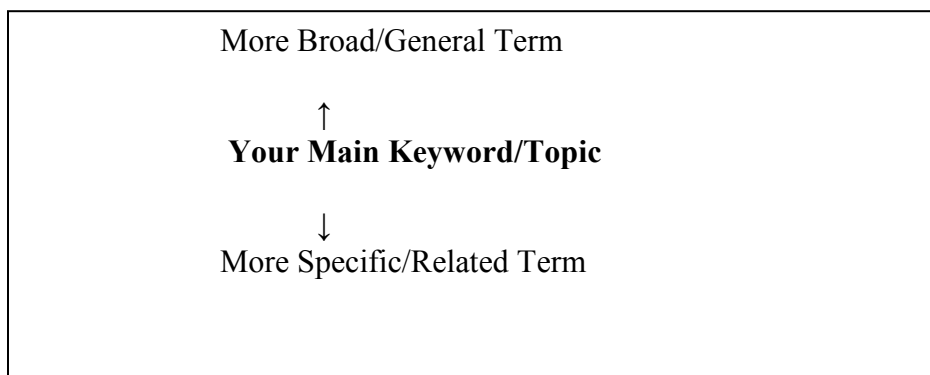
**Should baseball players in the Major League be permitted to use steroids?**

2. Next, a searcher needs to think of ways he/she can combine those terms in a search phrase to find the best articles related to his/her topic. Boolean Operators, Phrases, and Truncation can all be used to conduct a better search:

<u>Key Term #1</u>	<u>Key Term #2</u>	<u>Key Term #3</u>
"Baseball player*"	AND "Major League"	AND Steroid*

3. Next, the searcher should brainstorm other synonyms for EACH key term. Ask yourself: What terms might an author/writer be likely use in his/her article on this topic? What related topics might also contain information about my topic? Sometimes, you will need to think of synonyms that are more broad or general, and other times you may need to look for more specific or related terms. Often, more than one search will need to be attempted to find the best results.

**Consider the following chart:**





**Examples:**

Professional Athletes

Sports

Performance-enhancing drugs

↑

↑

↑

**Baseball Players**

**Major League**

**steroids**

↓

↓

↓

Jose Canseco  
Student athletes

Baseball  
high school sports

doping  
Creatine

Now you are ready to conduct several searches, any of which may provide you with information that you need:

	<u>Key Term #1</u>		<u>Key Term #2</u>		<u>Key Term #3</u>
<b>Synonym</b>	"Baseball player*"	<b>AND</b>	"Major League"	<b>AND</b>	Steroid*
<b>Synonym</b>	"Professional Athlete*"	<b>AND</b>	Sports	<b>AND</b>	"Performance-enhancing drugs"
<b>Synonym</b>	"student athlete*"	<b>AND</b>	"high school sport*"	<b>AND</b>	Creatine

## Planning Your Research - Identifying Keywords & Subject Headings

### Your Task:

Find one article on your topic, either from a general encyclopedia, a subject encyclopedia, or an Online Subscription Database (SIRS). Make or Print a copy of your article.

1. In the article, circle any important vocabulary terms that are associated with your topic.
2. Write down your researchable question/problem from page 3 here and circle the important keywords:

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3. From steps 1 and 2 above, list all of the important keywords associated with your topic. Add in any search techniques such as phrasing or truncation that will make your search more efficient (See Power Searching Tips link on the WUHS Library's Information Literacy page):

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4. Now that you've identified important keywords related to your topic, try finding the subject headings that fit your topic and which may lead to a more effective search.
  - a. Go to the online database SIRS. Try one or more of your keywords as a subject search. List the related subject heading(s) that appear: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. If no subject headings appear, try your keyword in a keyword search and move to part c.
  - c. Click on your subject heading(s) and find an article that looks the most relevant to your topic. At the bottom of your article summary, look at the descriptors for that article. (Descriptors are subject headings.) List here the best descriptors/subject headings that relate to your topic: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
  - d. Now try conducting another keyword search on your topic, this time in the Badgerlink EBSCOhost database. Once you type in your keyword(s), look in the yellow box on the left side of your results list. There, Badgerlink gives suggestions of how to narrow your topic by subject. Try a few keyword searches and record any subject headings that best relate to your topic:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Fill in the following chart with a combination of keywords or subject headings on your topic. Place your keywords on the blanks next to **Your Topic**. Then try to think of other synonyms for those keywords, either more general/broad or more narrow/related and fill those terms in the appropriate spaces provided.

<b>More Broad Terms:</b>	_____	_____	_____
↑			
<b>Your Topic:</b>	_____	_____	_____
↓			
<b>More Narrow/ Related Terms:</b>	_____	_____	_____
	_____	_____	_____

6. Using Boolean terms (and, or, not), combine the above keywords to create several search phrases that will provide you with the information you need:

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_

## Planning Your Research – Taking a Stance

You've chosen a topic. You've developed researchable questions. You've identified the keywords and subject headings that will help you locate the information you need to answer your questions. The next step in your research strategy is to take a stance on your issue.

In persuasive writing, a writer takes a position FOR or AGAINST an issue and writes to convince the reader to believe or do something.



Persuasive writing, also known as the argument essay, utilizes logic and reason to show that one idea is more legitimate than another idea. It attempts to persuade a reader to adopt a certain point of view or to take a particular action. The argument must always use sound reasoning and solid evidence by stating facts, providing logical reasons, using examples, and quoting experts.

Before you are ready to take a stance on your issue, you will need to identify and consider the two sides of your issue.

The WUHS library has several sources that can help you identify both the PRO (for) and CON (against) sides of your issue. Look for one or more of the following sources:

- A. Non-Fiction Books – In our non-fiction section, there are several series of books that will provide both sides of the issue on many different topics:
  - Opposing Viewpoints Series
  - At Issue Series
  - Contemporary Issues Series
- B. Reference Books – In our reference section, there are a few publications that will specifically address both sides of the issue on many different topics:
  - CQ Researcher
  - Taking Sides
- C. Online Source – The SIRS online database has a special section called Pro/Con Issues. On the opening page, look to the right side where it lists its top 10 pro/con issues. At the bottom of that section, you will see a link to More Issues. Once you click on that link, you will be taken to an alphabetized directory of all of SIRS Pro/Con Issues. Choose your topic and then click on the Pro/Con tab. You will be presented with a brief overview of the arguments on both sides of your issue.

**Your Task:**

1. Write down your researchable question/problem from page 3.

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2. Using one of the afore-mentioned sources, find your topic and state in your own words the two sides of your issue.

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3. Which side of the issue do you support, or in other words, what do you think SHOULD or SHOULD NOT be done?

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**Putting It All Together**

4. Considering your researchable question/problem, the background knowledge you've established, the keywords and subject headings you've identified, and your stance on your issue, write a preliminary thesis statement.

\*Hint: A good thesis statement should pass the following tests:

- Does it propose an arguable point with which people could reasonably disagree?
- Does it lead the reader toward logical subtopics?
- Does it avoid a "Who Cares?" or "So What!" statement?
- Does it express a claim that can be logically developed given the required length of the project?

Preliminary Thesis Statement:

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