Research Strategies

Many instructors assign a topic for a research paper, but sometimes they do not provide you with a topic. Either way, it will be your task to prepare a document that will most likely be graded. Use the following four steps to keep yourself moving in the right direction.

Step 1: Determine your information need.
How much, and what types of, information will you need to complete the assignment?

- **How will the information be presented?** Are you writing an essay? A term paper? Giving a speech?
- **How much information do you need?** How long does the paper need to be? A 2-paragraph essay may only require one source. A 15-page term paper could require dozens of sources.
- **What is the purpose of the assignment?** To inform? To analyze? To persuade? Will you need facts and statistics? Do you need to give an opinion? Do you need to present both sides of an issue?
- **Is your topic limited to a certain subject?** Or do you get to choose? If it is limited to a certain subject, how much do you already know about it? What questions do you have about it? Does the nature of the subject require the information to be up-to-date (technology, a recent event, etc)?
- **Has your instructor specified a certain number or type of sources?** Some assignments require that you have a set number of different types of sources, such as 2 books, 2 articles and 1 internet source. Make sure you are aware of any such requirements before you start.

Step 2: Identify and develop your topic.
When you need to select a topic, here are a few things to remember:

- **Choose a topic that interests you** and is relevant to your life.
- **List the words that are used to describe your topic**
- **Turn your thoughts and words into a question.** For example, suppose you would like to explore the topic of global warming. Think about what it is about global warming that you want to find out, and frame a question, such as "How will global warming impact the type of job I’d like to pursue?"

Step 3: Read General Background Information.
Read a general encyclopedia article or website on the top two or three topics you are considering.

Step 4: Develop a Search Strategy

A search strategy consists of the keywords in your topic sentence.

**Topic Sentence:** College students engage in risky behavior.

**Keywords:**

- college students
- risky behavior
Always identify synonyms or related words to help you obtain more results. Consult Merriam-Webster's Thesaurus Online- [http://www.m-w.com/](http://www.m-w.com/) for additional terms.

Synonyms for risky behavior:

**risk-taking**  
**risk-taking behavior**

Think about different ways to define risky. Merriam-Webster's Thesaurus offers these synonyms:

- dangerous  
- grave  
- grievous  
- hazardous  
- jeopardizing  
- menacing  
- parlous  
- perilous  
- serious  
- threatening  
- unhealthy  
- unsafe  
- venturesome

Choose examples of specific risky behaviors:

**high-risk drinking**  
**substance abuse**  
**sexual risk-taking**

Obtaining a variety of terms allows you to develop a more sophisticated search strategy.

**Step 4: Search the Delaware Library Catalog and Library Databases to find background information and resources on your topic.**

Use the Delaware Library Catalog or Discovery (Worldcat Local) to find books on your topic available in libraries. Both the Delaware Library catalog and Discovery also list journal titles, videotapes, DVDs and CDs that the library owns. The Wilmington University Library subscribes to many electronic scholarly databases that can be used to search for articles about your topic. Many databases also provide the full text of the article.

**Step 5: Find Internet Resources.**

Topic-oriented websites can provide you with useful leads in your research. For example, try using:

The Internet Public library: [http://www.ipl.org/](http://www.ipl.org/)  
[www.refdesk.com](http://www.refdesk.com)  
[www.fedstats.gov](http://www.fedstats.gov)  

**Step 4: Cite what you find.**

"Citing a source," means that you are telling the reader of your paper where you got a specific quote, fact, graphic, or idea. This allows the reader to check up on your information, to make sure you have:

- drawn on authoritative sources  
- used them fairly  
- copied from them accurately  
- included all important details  
- and interpreted them correctly
All courses at Wilmington University use the “APA Style Manual”. APA stands for American Psychological Association. The APA has published this manual to help writers, students, and professionals in the field of psychology prepare and write papers. This system has also been adopted by many other fields as well.

Because the field of publishing is constantly changing, updates in APA style can be found at the APA Publication Manual Web site: [http://www.apastyle.org](http://www.apastyle.org)