



# Method to the Madness: How Should I Begin my Research Paper?

Information Bulletin #12

## Step I. Read Your Assignment

It is always a great idea to understand your research assignment. Many times students simply do not take the time to **READ, COMPREHEND** and **UNDERSTAND** the assignment. If you have questions regarding the assignment, always ask your instructor to clarify.

## Step II. Explore your topic

Frequently, students come to the library with assignment in-hand ready to begin the research process on a computer database. As wonderful as technology may seem, it alone will not "fill in the gaps" of your research question.

Begin your database research after you have explored the background of your subject. Use print sources such as a **specialized handbook or dictionary** (available in **all** subject-areas) to better understand your subject.

Develop the "big-picture" by reading a current article in the daily newspaper or magazine article (try *CQ Researcher* for social issues and current topics), look at bibliographies on your subject, or try a subject-specific encyclopedia. Any of these will help you develop your frame-of-reference and give you a general idea of your subject matter.

## Step III. Develop your search terms

You have developed your topic and found background information. Next, develop your search terms; write down at least ten. These ten are a combination of what you think might want and

what you think you may find. ***The key is finding the proper search term(s) that express the subject you are searching.***

Check LC (*Library of Congress Subject Headings*) in the 1<sup>st</sup> floor Reference Section ([Z695 .L695](#)) to determine whether or not you are using the correct search term. LC controlled subject headings are used by most databases and can offer a larger amount of good results ("hits") on databases. Also, check the online subject, wordlist or thesaurus links included on many databases.

#### **Step IV. Strategize**

If you have gone through the above steps and still aren't finding the information you need, re-think the way you are searching. Is the topic too broad or too narrow? Think of other words you could use to express your research topic. Are there at least one or two articles that share your ideas or vision? Check the bibliography or references listed at the end of the article if it is included.

If you still cannot find the information you need, **ASK A LIBRARIAN!**