Research: The First Steps

Introduction
The ability to perform research for a paper or other assignment provided by your instructor is a process that usually starts with you selecting a topic and ends with finished product, which could include a paper, ready to be handed in. This handout provides general steps for the research process.

Define your topic.
Do you have a specific topic that you must research or did your instructor leave it open? If you have a specific topic then you must research that topic. If you have more options about a topic, then think about what interests you or what you would want to read about.

Tip: Select a topic that you are interested in because you may be researching and writing about this for several weeks or the entire semester.

Get an overview of your topic.
To get background information about your selected topic, use print encyclopedias (either general or subject specific), electronic encyclopedias (Credo Reference, Gale Virtual Reference Library), lecture notes, or textbooks. These resources will provide you with basic information about your topic and may help you further define what you will write about.

Tip 1: The library has a good selection of print/electronic encyclopedias (both general and subject specific) to provide a brief overview of many topics.

Tip 2: When using OneSearch, many results include Research Starters. These results provide links to citable, authoritative summary articles for thousands of popular topics.

Where should you begin?
Before using any database or catalog to find information about your topic, stop and think about what words describe your topic. These are your keywords that you will use when searching.

· Try to find unique terms that describe your topic.
· Think of other words that people may use for the same idea you are working on (synonyms).
· Use Boolean operators (AND/OR/NOT) and phrase searching.
· If you don’t find anything relevant when searching, broaden your search.

Find Books, Articles, and Web sites about your topic.
Once you have identified your keywords, you can look for books, articles, and web sites (as allowed) that may have relevant information.

Books – Use the Lewis J. Ort Library Catalog to find books relevant to your topic.

Tip 1: You can also order items from other University of System of Maryland and Affiliated Institutions (USMAI) campus libraries through Inter-campus Loan.

Tip 2: If a book you are interested in is not available here or in other USMAI libraries, you can order the item through Interlibrary Loan.

Articles – Search for articles using OneSearch or subject specific databases.
Tip 1: If an article you are interested in is not available either electronically or in print from the library, you can order it via Interlibrary Loan.

Tip 2: If you have a specific article you are looking for, you can use OneSearch to see if the library has the article in print or electronically.

Tip 3: You should keep a copy of the article you have found whether you print it out, e-mail a copy of the article to yourself, save the article to a flash drive, or save it to the cloud. This makes it easier to find the article in the future.

Websites – Your instructor may allow you to use websites in your research. You will want to evaluate the information you have found.

Steps to think about when you evaluate a website:
1. Is the website current? (Currency)
2. Who is the author? (Authority)
3. Is the information accurate? (Accuracy)
4. Is the topic covered thoroughly? (Coverage)
5. Is the website relevant to your topic? (Relevancy)
6. Finally, does the information from the website complement the information you already have?

Tip 1: You should always look for other information sources for your paper and not rely solely on information from the internet.

Tip 2: Once you have chosen information from a website, make sure you print out the web page. This will provide you with the website (to refer back to later) and will help you complete your works cited page especially since websites can change day to day or be taken down completely.

Read and take notes from the books, articles, and web sites you have discovered.
Once you have gathered all your books, articles and other resources you are now ready for the most important part of the research process – reading and taking notes.

You want to keep track of where your notes come from and note any direct quotations that you are going to use.

Tip: Attach the notes you have taken to the article or book that you are using for the assignment and set those aside.

Once you have completed this part of the process you are ready to write your paper.

Remember: You must properly cite all information you have gathered from books, articles, and websites using the citation style your professor requires.

Additionally: To avoid plagiarism, you must tell the reader where you got your information from in your paper/assignment both in the body of the work and the Works Cited page.

For additional assistance, please contact the Reference Desk at libref@frostburg.edu or 301-687-4424.