Forming Your Search Strategy

- **Select a topic**
  If you need ideas for a topic, there are a wide variety of options you can go to. Ask your professor, check out one of the library’s research guides in your subject area, do a broad search in a subject related database (for instance ERIC for Education or Issues and Controversies for current issues), look through your textbook or talk to fellow students.

- **Develop the scope of your topic**

- **Summarize your topic into your initial research question or statement**
  Once you have a topic, summarize it into a sentence or question to form your initial thesis statement. What do you want to find information on? Use your own words and be as specific as possible. For example instead of saying “I want information on cars.” Say “Are hybrid cars really better for the environment than cars using gas.”

- **Identify the main concepts**
  Take thesis statement and highlight the main concepts. Concepts are the different elements which make up your search topic. Most thesis statements can be broken down into two or three main concepts to start with. Concepts in the example thesis statement above would be **hybrid cars**, **environmental impact** and **gas cars**.
Select your search terms
For each concept, write down any synonyms and related terms that you can think of; they can be words, phrases or acronyms. A thesaurus is a great tool to use if you need help.

Combine the search terms (Boolean)
When you use more than one search term you need to tell the database or search engine how to look for them. Use the word AND between search terms for different concepts – it will find items that contain all the terms. Use OR between terms within the same concept to find items that contain either search term. Use NOT to find all of the items that contain your first search term while excluding those that contain your second term.

Other criteria to consider when searching in a database
Most databases provide search limit options which you can use along with your search terms to narrow down your results list. Two you might find useful are:
- Date Range – use this feature to only get items between a certain date range, such as the current 5 years
- Peer-Reviewed or Scholarly Journals – many professors require you to find academic level, empirical research articles. This limit removes any newspapers, magazines, trade publications, etc. which are not scholarly journals.

Select the resource to use
Now you are ready to try your search strategy. If you are looking for books, start with the Library Catalog. Select a database based on the type of material you want to find: subject specific, art work, articles, music files, etc. Most of the databases and the Library Catalog have an Advanced Search option which provides multiple boxes where you can input one concept in each row.

Document your search strategies
Keep a Research Log. As you search, document your search strategies and search results for your research project.

Revise your research question or statement (based upon search results):

Revise your search strategy