THE SEVEN STEPS OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The following seven steps outline a simple and effective strategy for finding information for a research paper, evaluating resources, and documenting what you find.

Step 1: Identify and Develop Your Topic

State your topic idea as a question. For example, if you are interested in finding out about the impact of large dairy farms on Minnesota lakes, you might pose the question, "Does dairy farming contribute to pollution in Minnesota lakes?"

Identify the main concepts or keywords in your question. Think of synonyms to use or ways to narrow or to broaden your topic.

Step 2: Find Background Information.

Once you have identified the main topic and keywords for your research, find one or more sources of background information to read. These sources will help you understand the broader context of your research and tell you in general terms what is known about your topic. They will give you an idea of how much and what kind of information is available on a given topic. The most common background sources are **encyclopedias** and **dictionaries** from the library reference collection. **Textbooks** also provide background information.

Read the background information and note any interesting sources (books, journals, magazines, etc.) listed in the **bibliography** at the end of an encyclopedia article or dictionary entry. The sources cited in the bibliography are good starting points for further research.

Step 3: Locate Books

You can identify relevant books in the Normandale Library by searching the online Library Catalog available on the library home page. You can search the keyword or subject heading indexes, but remember that the subject heading index uses a controlled vocabulary. If you locate books at another library they can be obtained on interlibrary loan. Ask at the Circulation Desk.

Remember that many of the books you find in the NCC Library Catalog and will also have **bibliographies**. Check these bibliographies for additional relevant resources for your research.

Step 4: Locate Articles in Periodicals (Magazines, Journals, and Newspapers)

Periodical articles are excellent sources for detailed analysis or up-to-date information on a topic. These articles are from materials that are published "periodically" or sequentially in daily, weekly, monthly, quarterly, annual or even irregular intervals. They are found in newspapers, magazines, journals, yearbooks, and other sources.

What's the difference between a journal and a magazine?
In general, **journals contain scholarly articles** written by professors, researchers, or other professionals. They are published by academic or professional associations and are "peer reviewed", which means that other scholars have read and approved the research before they were published. **Check bibliographies** for additional relevant resources for your research.

Magazines, on the other hand, **have articles aimed at more general audiences**. The articles are usually written by journalists, edited by editors with a journalism background, and published by commercial publishing houses like Time-Warner or Conde Naste.

To locate articles, select "Magazine and Newspaper Databases" on the library home page. There are a variety of databases you may want to use to find articles on your topic, but general indexes such as *Expanded Academic*, *Academic Search Premier*, **and** *LexisNexis* are good databases to start your research. These databases contain many full-text articles that can be printed or e-mailed.

You can access most of the databases from off-campus if you have an active Normandale library card. Select "*Off-campus Database Access*" for more information.

Step 5: Locate Resources on the Internet

Use a search engine such as Google to locate resources on the Web. Using the advanced search will help to focus your search and locate more reliable websites with accurate information**. Check domain extensions (.com, .edu, .gov)** as they can be used to help determine authority and objectivity.

Always evaluate Internet resources to determine their quality and relevance to your topic before citing them for a research assignment. Select "*Evaluating Internet Resources*" on the library home page and use the criteria to help you evaluate resources.

Step 6: Evaluate the Information

Evaluating the authority, usefulness, and reliability of the information you find is a crucial step in the process of library research. The questions you ask about books, periodical articles, multimedia titles, or Web pages are similar whether you're

looking at a citation to the item, a physical item in hand, or an electronic version on a computer.

Learning how to determine the relevance and authority of a given resource for your research is one of the core skills of the research process. For more assistance with the research process, consult your instructor or a reference librarian.

Step 7:   Citing the Information You Use

Give credit where credit is due; cite your sources.

Citing or documenting the sources used in your research serves two purposes, it gives proper credit to the authors of the materials used, and it allows those who are reading your work to duplicate your research and locate the sources that you have listed as references.

Most instructors use either the MLA (Modern Language Association) or the APA (American Psychological Association) citation styles. **Select "*Citing in MLA Style*" or "*Citing in APA Style*" from the library home page for citation examples of the more common document types.** Print manuals are available at the Library Reference Desk.