# Research Process - Overview

Research is an iterative process of asking questions, finding information, refining your ideas, and contributing your own voice to an academic conversation. Whether you are writing a short essay or a final BA thesis, following these six steps will save you time, help you find better sources, and ensure you meet academic standards.

> **Note:** Research is rarely a straight line. You will often need to revisit earlier steps as you learn more about your topic.

# Step 1: Define Your Research Question

Before you can search effectively, you need a clear focus. A strong research question is specific, debatable, and complex enough to require genuine investigation.

- **Understand the scope:** Review your assignment parameters, such as length, required source types, and deadlines. For a thesis, ensure your scope is feasible within your timeframe.
- **Brainstorm:** Start with broad topics that genuinely interest you and narrow them down.
- **Use AI responsibly:** Generative AI can be an excellent brainstorming partner to help you narrow a broad topic into a specific question. Always verify the output and consult the library guidelines on Making the most of Generative AI (ChatGPT etc.).

**Read more:** How to Define a Research Question

# Step 2: Gather Background Information

Do not dive straight into complex academic journals. Start by mapping the landscape of your topic to understand key debates, definitions, and vocabulary.

- **Consult reference sources:** Use subject encyclopaedias, handbooks, and glossaries to grasp the fundamental concepts.
- **Harvest keywords:** Note the specific terminology, theories, and key authors mentioned in your background reading. You will need these for your literature search.
- **Refine your focus:** If you find too much information, you may need to narrow your question; if you find too little, you may need to broaden it.

**Read more:** Gathering Background Information

# Step 3: Develop a Search Strategy and Find Sources

Academic searching requires different tools and techniques than a standard web search. A systematic approach ensures you do not miss critical literature.

- **Build a search string:** Combine your keywords using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to focus your results.
- **Choose the right tools:** Decide when to use the library catalogue (OPAC) for books, versus specialised databases (like EBSCO or JSTOR) for peer-reviewed journal articles.
- **Search iteratively:** Run a search, review the results, adjust your keywords, and search again.

**Read more:** Developing a search strategy

# Step 4: Evaluate Your Sources

Not all information is equal. You must critically assess every source before deciding to use it in your academic work, especially for a thesis.

- **Assess the authority:** Who is the author, and what are their academic credentials?
- **Check the evidence:** Is the publication peer-reviewed? Does the author cite their sources clearly?
- **Identify bias:** What is the purpose of the publication, and what perspectives might be missing?
- **Apply a framework:** Use established methods like the CRAAP test or the SIFT method to evaluate texts systematically.

**Read more:** How to evaluate academic sources

# Step 5: Read, Manage, and Synthesize

Once you have your sources, you need to extract the relevant information and organise it so you can build your own argument.

- **Read strategically:** Read the abstract, introduction, and conclusion first to determine if a paper is highly relevant to your research question.
- **Take thematic notes:** Group your notes by theme or concept rather than just by source. This makes it easier to write a coherent literature review.
- **Manage your data:** Use citation management software to save PDFs, organise notes, and generate bibliographies automatically.

> **Tip:** The library strongly recommends using **Zotero** to manage your sources. See our guide on Citation Management Software.

**Read more:** Read, Manage, and Synthesize

# Step 6: Write and Cite

Writing is how you enter the academic conversation. It requires integrating your sources accurately, ethically, and persuasively.

- **Structure your argument:** Outline your introduction, body paragraphs (supported by evidence), and conclusion.
- **Integrate sources:** Use direct quotes sparingly. Prefer paraphrasing to demonstrate that you fully understand the material.
- **Cite correctly:** Apply the required citation style to avoid plagiarism and give proper credit to original authors.

> **Faculty Requirements:** The Faculty of Business (FoB) uses **APA** style. The Faculty of Architecture and Design (FoAD) uses **Chicago** style.

**Read more:** Write and Cite

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Revision #55
Created 2022-02-24 12:21:48 UTC by Librarian
Updated 2026-08-13 11:48:18 UTC by Librarian