Part 1: Thinking about your topic and preparing to search

Step 1: What is your topic? Briefly state your topic in a sentence or two.

Step 2: What kind of information sources do you need? Think in terms of type (scholarly articles, background information, magazine articles, newspaper articles, statistics or other facts/data, etc.) and in terms of quality (authority, currency, accuracy, reliability, etc.). Think also about quantity: how much information do you need (lots of articles? A few books? One encyclopedia article for background information?). List the kind of information sources you want, and how much you want, here.

Step 3: What kind of information tools can you use to find the kinds of information sources you need? Which tool is the most appropriate tool for your specific information needs? For example, do you need a database that finds articles in specific subject areas, or would a more general, multi-disciplinary database be appropriate? List the tools you want to use here.

Step 4: Once you’ve decided on the type of sources you want and the tools you have to locate them, you need to formulate your search query. Databases do not speak the same language we do, so you have to take your topic, boil it down to its bare bones, and then put it back together in database language. The first step of this is brainstorm a list of words and concepts associated with your topic. List those words here.

Step 5: Then, using the words you just listed, put those words together in a phrase, using the word AND to connect them. Use quotation marks around terms you want to search as exact phrases. This is your search query.

Example of a weak search query: what causes conspiracy theories in the United States
Example of a better search query: “conspiracy theories” and “united states”

Formulate a few search queries and list them here.
Part 2: Searching for information on your topic

**Step 1:** Using the search queries you came up with on the previous page, conduct searches in one of the article databases you identified to locate articles on your topic. If you do not get any results, try rephrasing your search using the list of words you generated on the previous page. List the search queries you used here.

**Step 2:** Review the first few search results by reading the titles, abstracts, and subject headings of each citation. How can this information be useful to you at this stage of your research? What clues are available to help you determine quality, credibility, and relevance to your information need?

**Step 3:** Experiment with the search limiters available (e.g. limit by date range, full-text only, etc.) and conduct a new search. How do these limiters affect your search results?

**Step 4:** Try using AND to add in another search term. For example, if your initial query was “conspiracy theories” and “united states”, try “conspiracy theories” and “united states” and politics. What additional term did you use, and how did the addition of this term affect your search results?

**Step 5:** Choose one relevant article from your search results. How did you determine its relevance? Can you use any of this information to conduct new searches?