

How to Write a Winning Research Paper:  
Information Competency and The Pre-Writing Process

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*Please read this handout very carefully and thoroughly before you begin internet research. Follow the instruction and advice provided by Mr. Susan Luevano in our library instruction class; reference her research website on our Beachboard platform if you need a “refresher.”*

**I. INTEREST** Choose a topic that interests you. You will have to spend a lot of time and energy on it, and there is more chance you will do a good job if it is something you want to know more about.

**IDEAS** You can get some ideas by browsing among current periodicals (*Newsweek*, *Time*, *La Opinion*), or by browsing through

**SCOPE** Your topic must be manageable. Avoid choosing a topic that is too broad or too narrow. If it is too broad, you will be overwhelmed by too much information (e.g. Latino education). If it is too narrow, too specialized, too new, too limited in appeal, you may not find enough material (e.g. ethnic Latino-Africanos migrating from Cuba to Eau Claire, Wisconsin in the 1940s). Refine the subject by focusing on a broader/narrower time span, a larger/smaller place, a broad/specific group of people, or a general/specific event.

**TIME** Choose a project that can be finished in the time you have. If it is a busy semester, choose a topic you know something about and that is common enough to be found easily. It is better to do a smaller project well than to do a sloppy job on a more elaborate project. You will run into snags: you need Interlibrary Loan, you need to recall a book, you need to visit other libraries, etc. Allow time for the frustrations of using a busy library: lines at the copy machines, books not on shelves. Then plan for enough time to read the material and **THINK** about it before writing your paper. It is important to find information. It is more important the way you use it.

**APPROACH** There are different approaches that can be taken with a topic. For example, you can analyze or explain, narrate events or developments, argue pro or con, or be rhetorical or serious.

**ASPECTS** Most topics have many different aspects you can research. Each aspect requires different sources of information so it is important to establish what aspect of the topic interests you most from the beginning. For example, take the subject of trucking. You could look at the engineering aspects of trucks, energy and environmental issues related to trucking, government regulation of the trucking industry, truck driving music, women truck drivers, or the language of trucking.

**CLARITY** Be clear about what topic you are researching. It is true that a topic needs to be adjusted as the information is gathered, but you should always know what topic you are searching. Not having a clear idea of what you are looking for is dangerous because you are likely to get off track and waste time you cannot afford.

II. What is your preliminary research question?

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What are your keywords?

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III. Researching: This means going to the CSULB databases and/or University Library home page.

What did you find? Cite at least five articles and their titles:

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What University databases were most useful to you and why?

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How did specific resources make you rethink your topic?

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IV. What is your **refined** research question?

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What are your new keywords?

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V. Working thesis that will guide your research.

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VI. Working Bibliography: 15-20 key sources that may be useful for your final research project. Use MLA style.