Creating a Preliminary Bibliography

Doing research on an unfamiliar topic requires scanning the available information, refining your topic using what you have found, and selecting the most promising sources to work with. Take these steps to create your initial list of sources, which should be formatted using [your choice of] citation style.

One: Plan your search.

1. What is your general topic? What do you already know about it? Write a short paragraph summarizing your thoughts.

2. What key concepts are related to the topic? What alternative words could you use in your search (e.g. Native Americans or Indians, gaming or gambling or casinos). Write down your list of concepts and keywords. You may need to revisit these concepts and terms as you continue the research process.

Two: Make an initial scan of resources.

1. What books are available? Use IUCAT, the IU Libraries catalog (iucat.iu.edu), to conduct a search. It may also be helpful to browse the shelves. If you locate one or two books on your topic, you’ll find many related books next to it on the shelf.

   Be prepared to broaden your search terms if necessary. If you don’t find a book devoted entirely to your topic, ask yourself “What sort of book might include information on my topic?”

   When you find a book that looks promising, check the subject headings for alternative search terms – and be prepared to reformulate your search accordingly.

   (For more tips on Searching IUCAT see the handout at libraries.iub.edu/teach/handouts.)

2. What articles are available? Use the database OneSearch@IU to conduct an initial search. (Go to libraries.iub.edu/onesearch or from the libraries homepage go to Resource Gateway>Top Recommended Sources>OneSearch@IU). Alternatively, you might use a more specialized database recommended by your instructor or by a librarian.

   Keep in mind that articles tend to be much more narrowly focused than books. Be prepared to narrow your search terms if necessary. From the database search results page explore ways to limit or broaden your search.

   The list of subjects on the results page (left side) is a helpful way to quickly see what topics your results cover and to limit your search. Similarly, when you find an article that looks promising, check the subjects field for alternative search terms – and be prepared to reformulate your search accordingly. Also, pay attention to different perspectives on your topic.
You may find interesting ways to narrow your search by focusing on one aspect or another.

Depending on your topic and the types of sources you need, you may find it useful to limit your search to scholarly (peer reviewed) journals by clicking that option under the search boxes.

(For more tips on Searching OneSearch@IU or Basic Search Tips see at libraries.iub.edu/teach/handouts.)

3. [if relevant] Are there valuable Web resources on your topic? Which government agencies or non-profit organizations might be likely to publish information of interest? As you search, consider which Web sources your readers would consider credible. A Web page that seems to have relevant information may nevertheless not be considered a persuasive or convincing source.

Three: Make an initial assessment.

Gather together the books and articles you have identified as most relevant and examine them critically. Which seem most relevant and useful? How would each source contribute to your discussion of the topic? If it is important to have current information, are any of the sources out of date?

Once you have skimmed the most promising sources, revisit steps one and two. Has your understanding of the topic changed? Are there different terms you would use for a search?

Four: Trace cited works.

Take a close look at the most useful of the sources you have found so far. Does it have a bibliography? Would any of those books or articles be relevant for your research? If so, take the following steps:

- Look up promising book titles in IUCAT using the “title” search option.
- For journal articles, look up the title of the article in OneSearch@IU to see if we have online or print access to the right issue of the journal.

Five: Compile a preliminary bibliography.

Make a list of the most promising sources, with all the information needed for a full citation in [your choice of] citation style. You may wish to take take it to the reference desk (Wells Library Information Commons, 1st floor), where a librarian will review your sources and perhaps make suggestions for additional research.

Adapted from Folke Bernadette Memorial Library, Gustavas Adolphus College (https://gustavus.edu/library/exercises/preliminarybibliography.doc)