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] style.

One: plan your search

1. What is your general topic?
2. What do you already know about it? Can you list people, titles, locations, events? What key concepts are involved? What alternative words could you use in your search (e.g. women or female; medieval or middle ages; Hispanic or Latino or Latina or Latinx or Paraguayan).

Two: make an initial scan of resources

1. What books are available?
   Use Search It to conduct a search (http://searchit.lib.ksu.edu/). Click the K-State Libraries only tab or you will have to sort through a lot of journal articles, too.

   Browse the shelves. Once you find one good book, the books shelved beside it will be on the same or similar topic.

   Broaden your search terms, if necessary. The library may not have a book that is entirely devoted to your topic. Instead ask yourself “what sort of book might include information on my topic?” Look for books about an author or a genre or historical event, then look at the table of contents or index to see if your topic is discussed.

2. What articles are available?
   Use Search It (http://searchit.lib.ksu.edu/) or ProQuest Research Library on the libraries’ website under the Databases link - http://guides.lib.k-state.edu/az.php ) to search.

   Narrow your search terms if necessary. Articles tend to be more narrowly focused than books.

   Limit your search to scholarly (peer reviewed) journals by clicking that option under the search boxes.

   Use the options on the search results page to focus and narrow your results.
3. Build your alternative concepts/keywords list.
   Whenever you find a book or article that looks promising, check the subject
   headings for alternative search terms – try your search again using those terms.
   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.

**Three: make an initial assessment**

Gather together the books and articles you have identified and examine them critically.
Which seem most relevant and useful? What questions do they answer for you? Are any
of them out of date?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**

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:

1. Look up promising titles in Search It ([http://searchit.lib.ksu.edu/](http://searchit.lib.ksu.edu/))
   You may need to place quotations around the title to force Search It to bring the
   right title to the top of the search results, e.g., "Skip rope rhymes as a reflection of
   American culture"

   If the title doesn’t appear, double check the citation – could it be a book chapter?
   (Hint, book chapter citations differ from journal articles because they also include
   editors, a publisher – like Putnam - and city - like New York or London.) Search
   for the book title instead (hint, the book title is usually listed after the word “in”.)

2. Can’t find the title in Search It? Use Interlibrary Loan (linked on the Libraries home
   page) to request a copy from another library.

**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] style.

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