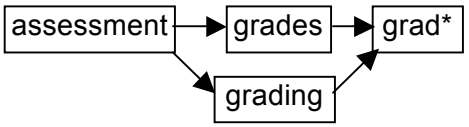
SOME RESEARCH STRATEGIES

1. **Have a sense of what you're looking for.**
   a. Already know stuff about your topic? *Pose a focused, concrete question.* This not only helps you get started (see step 2), but it also makes it possible to finish: if you have a topic but no question, you're likely to just pile information in a great, big, overwhelming heap. No good for you… or your readers. Ask, and ye shall perceive.
   b. Don't know a thing about your topic? *Wikipedia is a fine place to start: just don't end there.* Like all encyclopedias, Wikipedia can help you orient yourself quickly with a broad overview of a topic, including some of the major debates within it; use these to generate a focused, concrete question (see step 1a). But the virtues are also vices: a quick sketch does not a valid exhibit or argument make. Follow the bibliographic trail to something more substantial.

2. **Convert your question into a keyword search.**
   a. If your question is sufficiently focused, you'll probably have some words that are content-heavy – the words you'd switch out if you were templatizing, but which here you want to focus on. For example:

   Politicians keep calling for accountability in assessment. How have writing teachers responded to these calls? What might writing assessment look like?

   If your database has multiple lines to search with, *put each of these keywords in its own, separate line*; combining them often searches for an exact phrase (like "writing teachers").
   b. *Be prepared to be flexible* as to how you word these searches, especially if you get too few or too many hits. Try synonyms. Try using fewer (or more) terms at a time, or using variables. (Check your database's Help, including what wild cards are accepted.)



3. **Use limits and abstracts to your advantage.**
   a. Any academic database worth its salt, like Academic Search Complete, will include a number of filters (a.k.a. limits) to help you narrow your search results. It therefore often pays to *start with a relatively broad search (few search terms), and then zoom in*: let it show you only results with full-text available online, or only results with full bibliographic references available, or only results from within the last 5 years.
   b. Once you spot a likely title, click on it: for articles – and, rarely, books – chances are good that you'll find an abstract, which is a brief summary of the article's aims (Motivating Problems/Questions) and most important conclusions (Main Claim). *Use this information to decide whether you might want to read the entire article.* Tables of contents can help, too.

4. **Save as you go!**
   a. I can't tell you how many times I've had to counsel and console students who saw the most awesome text for their project, but didn't write down the name or how they found it. Alas, it never returned. Save citations that seem even potentially useful, and tag them with a few words as a reminder of why. Your project may shift, and you may want to come back.

5. **Once you've found one good text, milk it.**

    a. One of the main reasons we use bibliographies in academia is so that any single text can act as a doorway into an entire conversation-in-print. Given one recent text that's relevant to your question, you can rapidly retrieve dozens more simply by looking at its bibliography. This is what we mean by *following the bibliographic trail*.

    b. Step 5a takes you backward in time, to that text's They Say's. But computers now make it possible to go forward in time, also, to see what more-recent texts cite the one you've found *as* a They Say. Try the "cited by" link under each search result on scholar.google.com, or the "cited references" search on the top navigation bar in Academic Search Complete.

    c. In many databases, you can also expand the search around a given text by exploiting its *subject keywords*. Different than the keywords you usually use to start a search, these are special tags supplied by librarians and authors for the express purpose of finding related texts. To view the subject keywords, click through to the full information on the text you've found (often, the same page with the abstract); often, the subject keywords will be clickable links that greatly expand your list of results.

6. **Be comfortable with recursion.**

    a. At different points in the game, you'll be doing opposite things, and that's as it should be. Sometimes you'll want to widen your search for texts and ideas; sometimes you'll find something interesting, and want to narrow in on that; sometimes, narrowing will lead to a new, more focused question, which again sends you out in search of texts. This is not only okay, it's probably the best way we have of finding interesting, sustainable questions. Just keep your head above water, and don't try to drink too much from the firehose. Email me or drop by office hours at any time if you need help staying sane. :)

7. **Take notes as you go!**

    a. If you're on a page with an awesome quote, write down the page number somewhere *while you're on the page*. Don't copy quotes from someplace without keeping track; without a citation, you won't be able to use it, and that helps no one. Get in the habit of keeping track, so you don't have to think about it every time. If you're tech savvy, try zotero.org.

SOME USEFUL DATABASES

Find all of these at library.hunter.cuny.edu > Databases (in the left nav bar)

CUNY+. You should know all about this from VOILA. Borrow books from anywhere within CUNY!

Academic Search Complete. Includes mainstream and academic sources, with an excellent search apparatus – it will serve you well throughout college to get some practice with this.

Google Scholar. Instead of searching the "open web" (which could mean some 10-year-old's inaccurate blog), you'll be searching peer-reviewed academic journals, with cited-by links. Now indexes several major library databases, like JStor, with extensive composition-related holdings. (Go on to JStor for full-text pdfs: the button's on the upper right.)

WorldCat. If you find (in a bibliography) a crucial reference we don't have in the CUNY system, check here; it searches manymany libraries, and you may be able to get an InterLibrary Loan. See the ILL page at library.hunter.cuny.edu.

ERIC - Education (EBSCO). Education Resources Information Center; lots of comp/rhet-related holdings, though not all full-text. If you go the EBSCO route, you get (most of) the search apparatus of Academic Search Complete!

CompPile.org. Index of all things comp/rhet, with a nifty search-term glossary. If your keywords aren't working, try here.