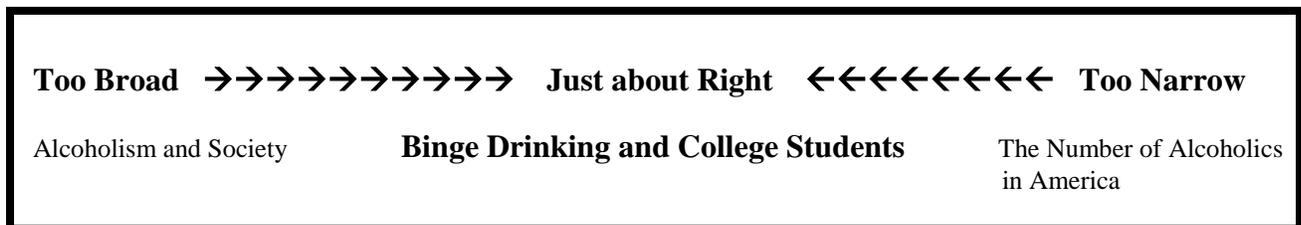# THE RESEARCH PROCESS
Ten Steps from Subject to Outline

I. Narrowing Your Focus

One of the most challenging things about writing college-level papers is developing a topic. Sometimes your topic is too broad (ie.: What is fashion?) and sometimes it is too narrow (ie.: Why do I look so good in orange?) In the first example, the topic is so broad that you could write 100 pages and not even get past the history of fashion, much less delve into marketing, psychology, social aspects, etc… In the second example, the topic is so narrow that there is either no research about it or there is simply not much to say beyond the thesis statement. Think about these topics:

Too Broad →→→→→→→→→→ **Just about Right** ←←←←←←←← **Too Narrow**

Alcoholism and Society   **Binge Drinking and College Students**   The Number of Alcoholics
                                                                        in America

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Sometimes your instructor will say that you need to start your paper with a thesis statement. The problem with that is that it presupposes that you know everything you want to say before you even begin. You can start with a research question and figure out what you want to prove after you know more about your topic.

What are the causes of binge drinking among students?

II. Break the question into keywords

If you type that question into one of our databases you won't find any articles. It isn't because the database doesn't work; it's because the databases use different rules than internet search engines. In order to do the same search in the databases, you should break the question down to only its most important words:

What are the causes of binge drinking among students?
Becomes

causes   binge drinking   students

III. Use those key terms to create a search strategy

Once you have broken your research question into keywords, you need to connect them with Boolean Operators. Boolean Operators is a fancy term for AND, OR, and NOT. AND narrows your search, OR broadens your search, and NOT excludes words from your search.

A search for Binge Drinking *and* Students finds articles that discuss binge drinking but only when they *also* talk about Students. **AND** will only retrieve articles about ALL of your search terms.

A search for Binge Drinking *or* Students finds articles that discuss either binge drinking or alcoholism. **OR** will retrieve articles about ANY of your search terms, regardless of whether or not they appear together.

A search for Binge Drinking *not* Students finds articles that discuss binge drinking without discussing alcoholism. **NOT** always *excludes* records/articles with the specified term.

IV. Performing a Search

Choose a database from the short menu located near the bottom of the page in the center column of the HWC library homepage at http://hwclibrary.ccc.edu/. Academic Search Premiere, EBSCO, and ProQuest are good general databases with access to millions of articles from newspapers, magazines, and academic journals from all over the world. You are encouraged to investigate all of the databases to see which are best for your discipline.

All modules from the scroll-down menu on the library home page. Once you log into ProQuest, click on the *Advanced* tab, and enter your search terms:
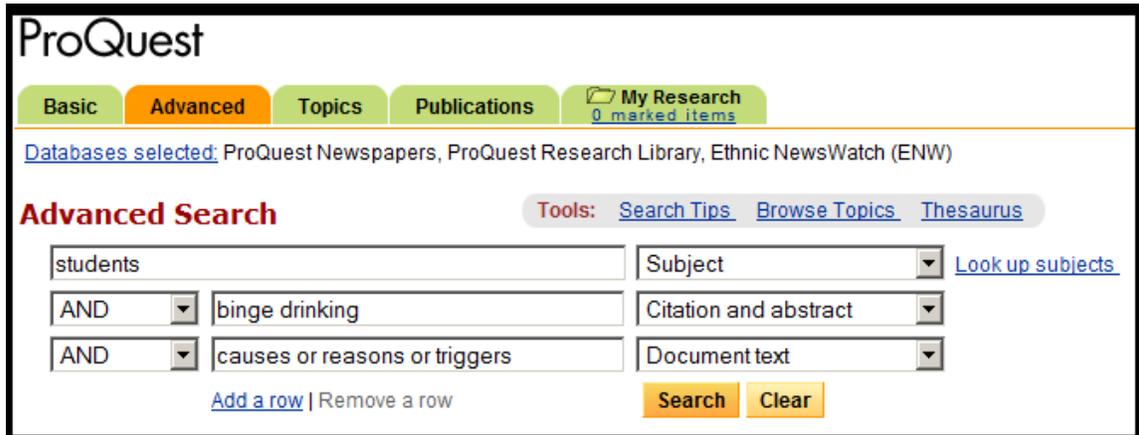

By checking "Full text only" you will receive listings of articles that are available in their entirety on-line.

If you can't find what you are looking for, try different keywords, and remember that you can always ask a librarian for help!

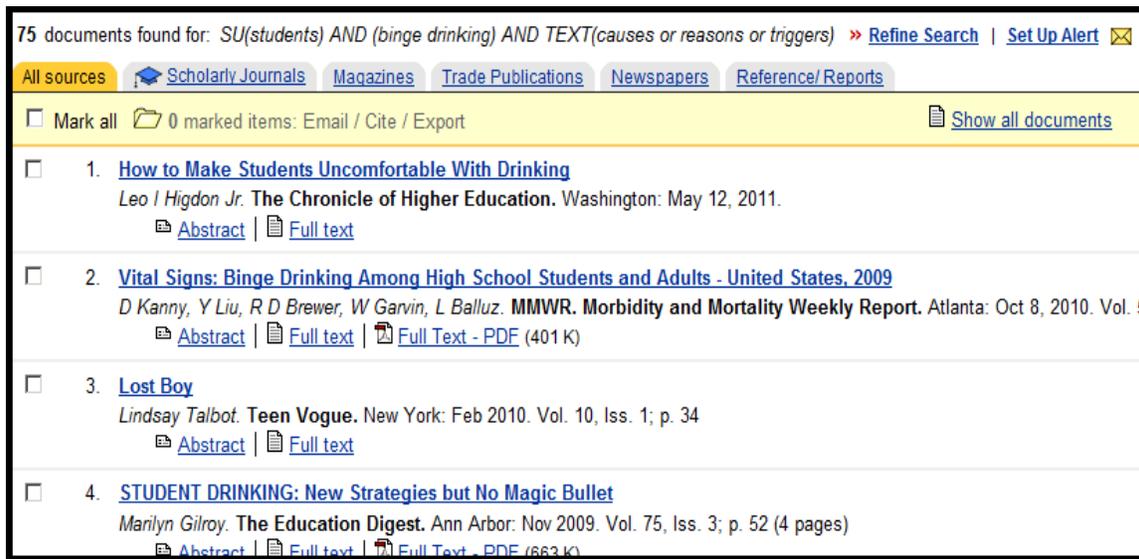**What are the different types of searches?**
ProQuest allows you to search for articles in many different ways. Once you get used to it, you will see that it has a BIG advantage over Internet search engines! You can search for work by a specific author or work with a specific title. You can search for news about a specific company, for articles about a specific location, or for a certain kind of article (like a book review or an editorial). Select *Citation and Abstract* to perform a general keyword search.

Once you are more familiar with the Library of Congress subject headings, try searching by *subject* for more accurate results.

The results of your searches should look like this:

If none of the articles looks relevant, look under **Suggested Topics** to see if ProQuest can offer you any help.

Click on the articles that look useful to you:

You can use the articles to write your paper, or you can read them to find new keywords or subject terms with which to perform other searches.

V. Save Your Searches
When you find useful articles, make sure you print them out, save them to a flash drive, or email them to yourself! Some databases will let you set up free accounts. Doing so will allow you to save your searches in the databases.

VI. Research the Source

Find out what you can about the publisher, the source, and the author. Do they have a known partisan or ideological slant? Where do they get their funding? Are the author's findings in broad concurrence with other experts in the field?

VII. Think about What You Have Found

This seems like a joke, but it isn't! Consider the following things:

Have you found enough information to answer all the questions you have about your subject?
If not, you can:
- revise your search strategy by searching for other keywords, subjects, authors, or titles
- refine your topic to be more specific or more general.

Is the new information credible, timely, and objective?
Does it come from an authoritative source? Is the source objective? Is it timely? Is it verifiable?

In general, these considerations will determine how you present the materials you have found. For instance, if new research provides a new way of looking at an old problem, it is good to know the timeline. If the new research comes from a think tank funded by a political organization or a specific industry, it should be looked at carefully to determine possible biases. Old research, on the other hand, should not be held up as the state of the art, though it may be useful to use when you describe the social or historical context of your paper.

What to Do with Different Kinds of Information.
Once you start researching your topic, you will likely find several different *kinds* of sources, some of which will be more useful than others. After reading an article begin asking questions: First, who wrote it, are his or her affiliations known? Does the language appear biased, or does the article present only one side of an argument? Is the purpose of the article to inform you or to convince you? What does the article leave out? When was the article written? Are there new developments that the article does not take into consideration? How does what you have found complement or contradict what you already thought?

The answers to these questions help determine how you will present the articles in your paper. In general, you will do one of 4 things:
1) Realize the article is off-topic and of no use to you.
2) Use the article to bolster your claim.
3) Present the article as a counter-argument and then refute it.
4) Realize that you cannot refute the article and modify your thesis.

For more help with sources, see the Guides and Help link on the Harold Washington College library homepage.

VIII. Use the information in your papers.

Put together a list of the information you want to use and the places where you got each quote, paraphrase, or summary you intend to use in your paper: (Make sure you have enough material to fulfill the assignment's requirements as well as--and more importantly--to make sure you have a firm understanding of your topic.) In order to fully integrate a quote, summary, or paraphrase into your paper, you need to do **four important things**:

1.) You must lead into the information.
You can't simply put a quote in the middle of your paper! You must lead into the material with your own words to prepare your reader for the transition. A good rule of thumb about leads is that they tell who said it and what his/her qualifications are:

According to Marylin Gilroy, author of *STUDENT DRINKING*: *New Strategies but No Magic Bullet*, "Experts say the root causes of excessive drinking revolve around depression, anxiety, peer pressure, and the desire for social acceptance. This is coupled with a culture of drinking often encouraged by local bars, which run promotions where low prices and happy hours offer incentives to drink."

2.) You must use parenthetical notation after the quote to show where you found it.
The parenthetical notation typically contains the author's last name and the page number on which you found the quote. When quoting from an electronic source without page

numbers, you should indicate the paragraph from which you take the quote, as in the example below. In any case, the parenthetical notation goes directly after quoted material:

According to Marylin Gilroy, author of *Student Drinking*: *New Strategies **but No Magic Bullet***, "Experts say the root causes of excessive drinking revolve around depression, anxiety, peer pressure, and the desire for social acceptance. This is coupled with a culture of drinking often encouraged by local bars, which run promotions where low prices and happy hours offer incentives to drink" (Par. 5).

3.) After each quote, paraphrase, or summary you must explain the quote's significance regarding what you want to prove or explain in your paper.
All of your cited materials should relate to the thing you want to prove, and you must show how they prove your point.

4.)   You must have a Works Cited page at the end of your paper.
The works cited page is a list of your sources alphabetized by author's last name. It includes: Author's name (last name first), article title, book title/magazine title, place of publication, and date of publication. When using any of the online databases, you should cite your source as an "Online Subscription Database." Such citations look like this:

Gilroy, Marylin. "STUDENT DRINKING: *New Strategies **but No Magic Bullet.***" *The Education Digest* 1 Nov. 2009: 52. *ProQuest*. Web. 11 Mar. 2010

Be sure to consult an MLA or APA Handbook for accuracy!

When to Quote, Paraphrase, or Summarize
As a general rule, exact quotes should be reserved for very precise information or for striking turns of phrase. Summaries and paraphrases should be used when you want to touch on a source's main points.

If you are paraphrasing or summarizing an article, you still need to follow the four steps above: lead into cited material, use parenthetical notation in the text, explain the material's relation to your thesis, and include an entry in your works cited page.

(You can read about paraphrasing and summarizing in any MLA Handbook or on sites such as Purdue University's Online Writing Lab.)

IX. Remember your research question?

What are the causes of binge drinking among students?
After you have done all your research, use the articles to answer your research question; the answered question is your thesis statement. For instance, say you found articles that pointed to the following reasons for binge drinking among students:

Reason 1 academic stress
Reason 2 peer pressure
Reason 3 lack of coping skills.

Your thesis statement would be:

The causes of binge drinking among students are academic stress, peer pressure, and a lack of coping skills.

Your thesis statement is the road map for your paper. You now know both the substance and the order of your paper. Use quotes, paraphrases and summaries to show that your thesis is correct.

All that remains is for you to write your introduction, present your thesis, arrange your reasons and evidence in a compelling order, and then write your conclusion.

X. A Couple More Things

Make sure you speak with your instructor about what is expected of you.
Also feel free to visit the library and review a copy of whichever style manual you are supposed to use for your paper/project.

There are also a number of websites to help you with your citations, such as Purdue OWL (http://owl.english.purdue.edu/).