

Research Process

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Research process

Think of your search query as a jigsaw puzzle, and the research process is all of the pieces that comprise the final picture.

The research process, as it relates to internet research, starts with having a clear vision of your research goals. Once you have a clear vision, you need to gather the puzzle pieces that will help put that picture together. Those puzzle pieces are the various resources available to you. Identifying key resources that will help you achieve your research goals, and framing how you will find those resources, are the major components of the research process.

As you collect the various resources, you will compile knowledge on your topic. Once you have retrieved a reasonable amount of authoritative information on that topic, your puzzle is complete.

The key idea of research is to not follow any single process blindly; rather, understand that you may well circle back as you learn. For example, you may start by defining questions you want to answer, but information you discover along the way may cause you to revise your questions, or ask new ones. In turn, these new questions lead to new search paths.

When you start searching, try to identify as precisely as possible what you want to know. If you encounter words you do not know, look them up so that you are confident about what you are trying to find. Consider what authoritative resources can help you better understand that topic. Once you have identified the resources you will need, you need to think about how you will get to those resources. Since you learn things during your research, plan to document the steps you are taking so you can refer back to them. As your puzzle starts to take shape, you will need to know when your picture is complete--identifying when to stop is just as important as initially framing the research question.

Consider the following steps when framing your research process:

Steps of the research process

Step 1. Clarify your research objectives and your research goals.

Before you begin, ask yourself: "What am I trying to achieve or be able to do?" and "What would satisfy my information need?" If you clarify the parameters of your research, it will give you a clear starting point from which to start searching the internet.

Step 2. Start broadly and narrow it down.

As a general rule, it is okay to start with a broad research question, and use the resources and ideas presented to narrow down your research. For example, if you are interested in the issue of female education in Sub-Saharan Africa, you may end up researching the how lack of access to water in Somalia impacts girls' ability to attend school.

You can also start with a narrow topic, but may find that it broadens as you proceed. For example, if you are trying to learn what kind of bug bite you have on your arm, you may end up researching the dangers and possible treatments for that kind of bite.

What you should try to avoid is starting with a very narrow *query*; if you start out typing 10 words into the search box, you will get severely limited results which will most likely lead your research to a dead end. When entering a search query, try to keep it relatively short, because short queries tend to provide the broadest amount of information. You can tighten it up as you identify and zero in on particular resources or terms.

Step 3. Identify resources.

[Matching resources to the kind of information you need](#) starts by asking yourself:

- "Are there any major resources I should be checking out on this topic?"
- "[Do I know anyone in my social circle](#) who knows a lot about this topic?"
- "Are these major resources openly searchable or do I have access to them through a local library or other resource?"

Example: If you purchased an assemble-it-yourself table and managed to spill some of the adhesive on your wooden floor, you might want to find specifications for that table, or a database of industrial adhesives, and then you might want to contact a friend who is a hobbyist woodworker to find the best way to remove the glue without damaging the floor.

Step 4. Keep track of what you do.

Each individual develops a research process that is manageable for him or her. However, while researching a topic, it tends to be a good idea to keep track of the information you find in case you need to refer back to it at a later time. You can always [use your web history](#) to help remember what searches you have run and what pages you have visited. But, especially for topics or ideas that are new to you, it is a good idea to write or copy down everything so that you have a running record of your research process.

Example: Copy and paste information and relevant links to your search in a Google Doc. Google Docs are free, real-time, easy to access, and are easily searchable and sharable.

Step 5. Plan to learn things along the way.

Much of the time, the research process not only provides an answer to the question for which it was undertaken, but also exposes a lot of other information along the way. In fact, a large part of research is learning about vocabulary or issues with which you are unfamiliar at the outset. It is

only by learning about a topic and applying what you learn that you can find your way to the desired outcome.

If you start with a broad search query, you may be presented with conflicting information, different points of view, and multiple ways of saying the same thing. The use of synonyms and understanding different opinions on your search topic are both advanced search skills to implement during internet research. Learning things along the way can also help you [triangulate your research and confirm information](#) to be true.

Example: If you do an internet search for [\[diabetes\]](#) you will inevitably learn about related topics like glucose, insulin, and treatments.

Step 6. Know when to stop the research.

How do you know when to stop your research and why does that matter? When you've answered your research question, no new information on the topic is being presented, or you feel that you have encountered a sufficiently authoritative source, that is when you should stop that particular thread of inquiry or the entire research process. Do not let yourself begin to feel that you have to continue on long past when you feel satisfied.

Think about the jigsaw puzzle analogy; do you need six pieces of the same puzzle piece to complete the picture? If you feel your sources are authoritative enough for your need at the time, and have found an answer or reached a conclusion--and satisfied the questions that came up as you were researching that are related to your immediate need--you can stop your research. Knowing when to stop is just as important as knowing how to initially frame your research question.