ENGL 101 Composition I

Process for Information Seeking & Finding

The process, as described below, may appear to be linear – that is, followed step-by-step without returning to a former step. Actually, the process is what we call “iterative.” Steps are repeated as needed during the research process. For example, during step 3, you might discover that your topic is too broad or that, having learned more about the topic, you have additional questions. In that case, you return to step 1 with a revised topic and new questions to research.

The return to former steps may result in a quick change in thought or action that you make “on the fly” or it might require consultation with your course instructor, a librarian, peers, or someone else.

In any case, research in the literature of your topic involves adapting your investigation as you gain more information and knowledge about the topic.

The Process

1. Define the problem:

   - What information do you need? **What questions** do you need to answer?
   - **What terms** do others use to describe the topic? Learning alternative ways to refer to the topic will be important when searching in research databases. For example, the topic “ethical treatment of animals” may be referred to as “animal rights,” “rights of animals,” “protection of animals,” etc.
   - **What information formats** (print or electronic) or **mediums** (text, audio, video, multimedia) **do you need for your research project?**
   - **Do you need to narrow or broaden** your topic? If your topic is too broad, you can try some of the following actions in order to **limit the topic** (focus the topic more narrowly) …
     a. Examine overview sources such as encyclopedias for specific issues, people, or events on which you might focus and/or
     b. Search the broad topic in a magazine index and scan the titles for issues, people, or events on which you might focus and/or
     c. Examine a couple of books on the broad topic to discover issues, people, or events on which you might focus.

2. Develop a strategy for finding the information.

   What types of source might contain the information? What are the best strategies for finding the information?
   - **Find an overview** of the topic in an encyclopedia or textbook (online or in print).
   - **Find current information** in magazine, newspaper and journal articles (print or online) and in radio/TV broadcasts (viewed live or found text transcripts)
   - **Find more comprehensive information** in books (online or in print)
• Consider other possible sources of information….
  1. find facts and statistics in almanacs, statistical compilations, directories
     --online or in print--, and on credible websites
  2. find definitions in dictionaries and encyclopedias (online or in print)
  3. find images, audio, and video (online or in the library)

3. Locate the information.

• Use search tools designed to find the sources you want
  a. Use research databases that are “periodical indexes” to find magazine, newspaper
     and journal articles and to find radio/TV broadcasts.
  b. Use the Library Catalog to find books videos, cassettes, magazines, & software that
     are in the Mundt Library or provided online by the Mundt Library (and other libraries in
     SD).
  c. Use the Library Catalog to find encyclopedias, fact books, books with statistics,
     dictionaries, etc. in the Mundt Library (or other libraries in SD).
  d. Use academic subject directories on the Internet to find web sources on topics
  e. Use search engines to locate specific web sites or specific facts on the Internet.
  f. Ask a librarian for assistance.

• Evaluate the search results
  a. Is the search producing the material you need? -- the right content? the right quality?
     right time period? right geographical location? If not,
     1) are you using the right words to describe the topic?
     2) the right sources?
     3) the right tools to get to the sources?
  b. Have you discovered additional terms that should be searched?
     If so, search those terms.
  c. Have you discovered additional questions you need to answer?
     If so, return to step 1 to begin to answer new questions

4. Evaluate and select materials (read, view, listen; evaluate; select).

Use the following criteria to evaluate the material you have found

a. Accuracy -- is the information reliable and error free?
   • Is there an editor or someone who verifies/checks the information? Is it peer-reviewed?
   • Is there adequate documentation: bibliography, footnotes, credits, quotations?
   ✓ An article with a bibliography of good sources carries more weight than an article without a bibliography, because you know who the author's sources are. On the other hand, a veterinary school may provide animal disease information that is quite reliable for pet owners, but not cite sources because it is not intended for a scholarly audience. You would trust the information because it was on the web site of reputable veterinary school. If your project allows the use of popular information, this is a good source. If only scholarly material is appropriate for your project, this source will not work.
   • Are the conclusions justified by the information presented?

   If you are unable to verify accuracy based on these 3 bulleted items, look outside the
   source itself (do additional research): Is the information verified in other sources? Do
   experts agree on the findings?

b. Authority -- Is the source of the information reputable?
   • What are the author's qualifications? staff reporter? scholar in field?
   ✓ A medical article written by an M.D. from a reliable medical research facility
     carries more weight than one written by someone whose credentials are
     unknown.
If no author is given, is publisher or webpage provider reputable? If the sponsor is not indicated on a web page, can you determine its origin from the URL and digging deeper into its website? (If the article or information is part of a reliable site -- for example, the Mayo Clinic -- then the information may be trusted even though no author is given.)

- How did you find the information? Did you use a research database or references from other reliable sources?
- What type of source is it? Sensationalistic? Popular? Scholarly?
- What is the reputation of the publisher?
  - If no individual is taking responsibility for the article, what organization is?
  - Evaluate the publisher's reputation for guaranteeing accuracy.

c. Objectivity – Does the information show bias?
  - An article written by an M.D. working for a company selling health food may be more interested in selling a product than in telling the whole story.
  - Does the source show political or cultural biases? An author may have particular political or social agenda and may not be giving you an objective account

If you are unable to determine objectivity based on the bulleted items above, look outside the source (do more research): Do other sources provide other viewpoints?

d. Currency - When was the information published? When was the information collected?
- Is it current?
- Does it reflect the time period about which you are concerned?

e. Coverage -- Does it provide the evidence or information you need?
- Is the audience for which it is intended appropriate for your purposes? (professional, layperson, child, adult?)
- Is it suitable for your level of understanding? (too simple, too difficult?)
- Is the information in the appropriate format? (print, electronic, video, sound?)
- Does it cover the topic(s) you need? Does it provide the main points or concepts you need? Do its major findings add to your understanding? Do they support or refute your original ideas on the topic?

5. Use/Synthesize (organize & integrate) to create finished project.

- Keep careful records during the course of your research so that you can cite the sources used and can distinguish your own words/phrasing from the words/phrasing you’ve borrowed from others.
- Cite all material used in your research project.
- Do not plagiarize.
- Follow all guidelines provided by your course instructor. Use the citation style and formatting required by your course instructor.