The Research Follow-Through
The beginning is the most important part of the work.”
Plato, The Republic

Step 1: Choose a Topic

- Choose a topic you care about, or adapt topics to your own interests
  - Know yourself (and choose topic—or narrow it—accordingly)
    - The subject I most enjoy reading about is ...
    - My favorite hobby or pastime is ...
    - If I won the lottery, I would use the money to ...
    - The type of volunteer activity I prefer is ...
    - My favorite school subject has always been ...
    - If I ran the world, the first thing I would change would be ...
- Discover a topic you want to know more about
  - How does this topic relate to any past/present concerns in my life?
  - How does this subject relate to issues I have recently been studying or thinking about?
  - How might this subject be important to me in the future?
  - How can I use this subject to explore something that I want to know more about?
- Make your research about finding answers to an intriguing question or set of questions.
  - Turn a “boring” topic into an interesting one.
  - Stumped? Ask others.
  - Still stumped? Browse (encyclopedias, newspapers, Internet).
- Choose a worthwhile topic
  - Identify the significance of your questions by fleshing out this three-step formula:
    (from The Craft of Research, Booth, Colomb and Williams)
    1. Topic: I am studying __________________
    2. Question: because I want to find out what/why/how ___________________
    3. Significance: in order to help my reader understand __________________
    4. Application: so that my readers can better ___________________
       [optional application step]

Step 2: Narrow Your Focus

- Restrict your project to a topic/task you can complete successfully.
- Determine the scope of your topic to meet
  - The assigned length of the project
  - The time you have to complete the project
  - The resources you have at your disposal

Step 3: Choose information sources to search, and key terms or phrases to use in searching them.

- Begin your research in the library—virtual or otherwise, considering the three main types of library resources:
  - General and special reference works
  - Books
  - Periodicals
- Become familiar with your library’s online catalog
  - IvyCat (Tip: Use IvyTILT, Module 3)
- Understand electronic search tools, periodical databases and web search tools
  - (Tip: Use IvyTILT, Modules 4 and 5)
- Formulate effective search terms (Tip: Use IvyTILT, Module 2)
  - Identify synonyms or related words or ideas.
  - Discover the Library of Congress subject headings that address your topic.
  - Combine your search terms into effective Boolean search phrases.
**Brief Guide to Boolean searches:**
Boolean searches are simple if you remember five basic guidelines.

Use the Boolean terms to specify the relationships between keywords:

1. **Use AND when you want both keywords to appear in the document:** turtles AND pets [Note: Some search tools require a plus sign (+) instead]
2. **Use OR when either keyword can appear in the document:** turtles OR reptiles.
3. **Use NOT to exclude unwanted terms:** salmonella NOT “food poisoning” [Note: some search tools require a minus sign (-) instead.]
4. **Enclose groups of search terms in parenthesis to indicate which actions should occur first:** (turtles OR reptiles) AND salmonella
5. **Enclose multiword search terms in quotation marks:** salmonella NOT “food poisoning.”

- **Ask questions** about your topic that will help you identify what kind of information you need and where you might locate it.
  - What do you need to know before you can make a convincing claim or prove your point?
  - What are you looking for—facts, statistics, definitions, ideas?
- **Decide where you should look**
  - Which sources are accurate, reliable, trustworthy?
  - Online catalog, periodical databases (use “Which database” guide), the Internet, personal interviews and surveys
  - Consider purpose of your research:
    - To locate factual support for a position?
    - To review opinions on a topic?
    - To discover new ideas?
    - To track down eyewitness accounts?
    - To find reasonable arguments on a controversial issue in order to develop your own?

**Step 4: Learn to scan results, refine search, and select useful sources for your research**
- Learn to scan results and refine search
- Make connections -- one good source leads to another
  - a book may contain an excellent bibliography that yields 5-6 additional good sources
  - a periodical article might reference another source that proves even better for your purposes than the original
  - hyperlinks in online catalogs or databases can help you track down links on the same or related subjects
- Evaluate sources according to:
  - Purpose
  - Reputation
  - Intended audience
  - Reliability
  - Timeliness
- Be prepared to cite your sources (IvyTILT, module 6)

Adapted from ideas presented in Research Strategies for a Digital Age by Bonnie L. Tensen. Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004.