Your Research Tool Box
You’ve got your first university research assignment. You’ve either chosen a topic of interest or one has been assigned to you. Now you’re going to jump right into finding information to help you write your paper, give your speech, or make your presentation - right? You’re going to start with Google because everything is on the Web and Google is the best search engine and all you need for college level research is MORE of the same stuff you used in high school - right?

NOT SO FAST!

For college level research you will need to look at information in an entirely new way. From the beginning you will need to go beyond Google.
Not all information is created equal. You will need to develop skills that help you identify, choose and use the most appropriate and the best of the tremendous amount of information available to you.
You will need to be more organized, more analytical and more critical about information than you have ever been in the past.
Knowing the basic steps of the research process can help you do fast, efficient and effective research whether you are using Google or one of the many library databases you will have access to during your college career.
You need a good research strategy to get good results. We are going to show you some research tools that will help improve your searching skills.
Make sure that you understand your assignment. This seems like such a simple concept, yet many research assignments get stalled early in the process because the assignment is not clearly understood. You should ask questions such as:
What is the purpose of the assignment?
How long should it be?
Who is the intended audience?
Read through your assignment as soon as you receive it and ask your instructor about anything that you do not understand.
Know your deadlines so you can plan your research and get your assignment in on time. If you have questions, now is the time to ask.

Give yourself some breathing room in case you run into problems. The closer you get to the final due date, the busier your instructor is likely to be with the students who didn’t start early enough.
Think about the type of information that you need. Do you need an overview? An in-depth analysis? Or current research? These are all very different types of information and can be found in a variety of sources.
Different types of information are used for different purposes.
Background information gives you an overview of the topic and will give you keywords and concepts that will help you refine your research.
Definitions of terms can come from specialized subject encyclopedias and dictionaries
Use Historical information to explain or put a topic within a historical context
If you want to include biographical information about a person, living or dead, there are many different biographical sources to choose from.
Statistical information, such as census data, is available from a variety of sources.
Sometimes you need data in a chart or graph to illustrate your point. Many sources have data available in chart format. Knowing the type of information you need can help you begin your research.
Professors often specify the resources that are required for your research assignment. Think about the types of resources you might need. Do you need an in depth treatment of a single topic? Maybe you need books.
Are you looking for current events or information about a famous person? You could find this type of information in a magazine.
Maybe you need the latest research or the opinion of an expert or a specialist in a field of study. This could be found in scholarly journals.
Different Types of Resources

Newspapers

Do you need an editorial or commentary? Try a newspaper.
Do you need company, organization, or government information? If so, you might want to look at corporate or government websites.
Your research success will depend in part on how well you develop your search strategy.

**State your topic as a question.** Ask yourself questions about the topic. Decide on one question you would like to answer.

Most of the databases and search engines that you will be using in college are organized by subjects. Identifying the main concepts or **keywords** in your question is critical when using these resources.

**Identify synonyms and other related words.** Consider using a thesaurus or an encyclopedia article to identify useful words and concepts. You may need to incorporate some of these terms into your searches to give you better search results.

Once you have the words or phrases that you think best describe the information you are looking for, it’s time to plan your search strategy.
In order to retrieve a manageable amount of relevant information, it is necessary to combine or link your search terms together.

Avoid choosing a topic that is too broad or too narrow. If it is too broad, you will be overwhelmed by too much information. If it is too narrow, too specialized, too new, or too limited in appeal, you may not find enough material.

When using Google it is easy to get over a million results. Library research databases are much more focused, but you still need to make your topic manageable.

Look at your topic. Is it too broad or too specific? How can you tell?
Let’s put some of these tools and techniques to work. We are going to use Google for this example. You can use the same research techniques in Google and learn to be a better researcher.

Here’s our topic: Identify the top spring break destinations for college students.

Now turn the topic into a question.
What are the top spring break destinations for college students?

What are the keywords or main concept of this question?
Spring break is the main concept. Use the words “spring break” as your keywords.
When we search the phrase “spring break” we get 34,800,000 results. This is not a manageable amount of information. Let’s add some other words from our search question to reduce our results.
What are the top spring break destinations for college students?

What other words from this question can we add to our search?
We can use the word “top” and some synonyms or related words.
Add the words top or best or popular to describe the types of spring break destinations that you are looking for.
By adding the synonyms “top or best or popular” to our original keywords “spring break” we have reduced our results to 12,000,000. That is over 22 million fewer search results. But, this is still far too many to work with. Let’s add some more terms.
Let’s limit our search to a population group.
college students
When we add ‘college students’ to our search strategy, we get a large reduction in search results. It is down from 12,000,000 to 566,000. As you can see the results are getting smaller. But, we still have a way to go. Can you think of any other words that might help limit our search?
What about the word destination and a related word – vacation?
Destination or vacation
Adding the words destination or vacation has reduced our search results to a fraction of the original results – from almost 35 million down to 196,000. Although the number of results for this search would be un-manageable for an actual research topic, this example illustrates how to focus and refine your search strategy in order to get better search results.
Search Strategy Basics

**Reduce** a high number of results by limiting

(Adding additional search terms)
spring break AND
top OR best OR popular AND
college students AND
destination OR vacation

Remember these search strategy basics the next time you search Google or one of the many library databases.
If you apply these same search strategies in a library research database, your searches will be more efficient and effective and will start you on your way to doing college level research.