Selecting a Topic

General Strategies
Select a Topic That Interests You!

- **Browse** books or journals in your general area of interest
- **Read up** on *possible* topics in a general or specialized encyclopedia
- **Look up** any unfamiliar terms in a general or specialized dictionary
Define and Focus

As you define your research question, focus on particular aspects of the topic.

This is an ongoing process!

- You may need to modify your topic several times.
- As you learn more, your understanding will change.
- As your understanding changes, so will your topic.
Identifying a Topic,
Moving from general to specific

- Relate your topic to a geographical location
  - Global Warming vs. Amazon Biodiversity
  - Solar Energy vs. Alternative Energy in the American Southwest
Identifying a Topic, Moving from general to specific

Discuss your topic in terms of your personal experience

- Hunting and biodiversity conservation
  - *Hunting is your hobby*

- Cuyahoga River pollution
  - *You grew up near the Cuyahoga*

- Toxic waste issues
  - *There’s a toxic waste site in your backyard*

- Farm issues and the environment
  - *Your favorite uncle is a farmer*
Identifying a Topic,
Moving from general to specific

- Discuss your topic in view of your future plans
  - Urban Planner ~ Urban Water Pollution
  - Conservation Biologist ~ Pandas, Dolphins, African Biodiversity
  - Chemist ~ Environmental Chemistry
  - Politician ~ Environmental Politics
Identifying a Topic, Moving from general to specific

Discuss your topic in terms of a specific time period

- Farm land conservation
  - Contrast trends from 1980s to late 1990s
- Acid rain
  - Did legislation enacted in various years have an effect
- Impact of war on the environment
  - WWII era vs. Vietnam era
Identifying a Topic,
Moving from general to specific

- Select a sub-field of your topic
  - Owl habitat loss from clear cutting vs. Deforestation
  - Impact of hi-sulphur coal burning on Adirondack forests vs. Acid Rain
  - Automotive fuel cells vs. alternative energy
Read ... to Develop a Broad Overview of Your Topic

In your Background reading, look for:

- Theories associated with the topic
  - Is there general agreement or controversy?

- Authors
  - If the same names recur in your reading, that’s your clue that you should check into their work
  - If the same work is cited in lots of different sources, it is seminal – read it!
Read ... to Develop a Broad Overview of Your Topic

In your Background reading, look for:

- Terminology
  - Learn the phrases, specialized terms, and jargon associated with your topic
  - You will use these terms when you begin searching databases and the web

- Bibliographies
  - These become your pointers to other relevant works on your topic
What should you read?

General encyclopedia articles

- Likely to have *some* information on almost any *broad* topic
- Will introduce the main concepts
- Will suggest other helpful sources
What should you read?

Specialized/subject specific encyclopedias

- Will contain detailed articles on a subject
- Articles are written by experts in the field
- Will have comprehensive bibliographies
What should you read?

- Specialized/subject specific dictionaries
  - Will define specialized terms and jargon
  - Can be like short encyclopedia articles
  - May have subject bibliographies
Use the Library Reference Books!

- G 1046
- GB 665
- GB 1201
- GC 9
- GE 149
- GE 3000
- GF 75
- HC 79
- TJ 163
What should you read?

General interest periodicals

- Provide a *quick, broad* overview of a subject
- Useful in the *beginning* of your search
- Will not provide scholarly information, use just for your own introduction to an issue
Read Current Journals!

- American Scientist
- Discover
- Ecological Applications
- EM
- Global Environmental Change
- Geotimes
- Nature
- New Scientist
- Science
- Scientific American
- Trends in Ecology and Evolution
Write to Clarify your thinking

- The act of writing forces your unconscious mind to sort through your muddled thoughts

- Even if you think you are unclear on what you want to do, start writing a few words or simple statements
Talk About Your Ideas

💡 Bounce your thinking off a friend or classmate
  - Shared minds create synergy

💡 Ask for help!
  - Dr. Krygier
  - Deb Peoples
  - Or any other OWU Reference Librarian
Where’s Deb?

- Hobson Science Library
- MWF 9:00 – 2:00
- TuTh 12:00 – 5:00
- Phone x3241
- Email dapeople@owu.edu