Librarians at BGSU formed “Understanding Student Information-seeking Behaviors to Enhance Student Learning”, a faculty learning community through the campus Center for Teaching and Learning. Members of this learning community are BGSU faculty from several disciplines across campus. Through the community we have explored ways to improve students’ abilities to contend with obstacles inherent in the research project. The community has also had opportunities to become more familiar with the University Libraries’ research tools and reflect on ways to enhance student learning. This guide pulls together readings on student research habits and recommendations from faculty about how to improve the student research experience.

The following assignment was created by one of the members of our learning community. It was reviewed by the community and established as meeting the above criteria. For additional sample assignments or information on creating effective research assignments, visit our LibGuide:

http://libguides.bgsu.edu/studentresearch

2011-2012 Understanding Student Information-seeking Behaviors to Enhance Student Learning

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Research Process Part #1—Framing the Research Question

To begin your research process, you must first isolate a topic area which can then lead you to a research question. A research question is basically an ISSUE-BASED, DEBATABLE question that you’re interested in answering. Over the course of your research process you’ll explore various aspects of the issue/question and, eventually, come up with your own answer, manifested in our Researched Essay.

The Research Question

Research questions can come from anywhere. You may be challenged by a class discussion, a chat with friends, or a random article on the internet. Regardless, the research question must be debatable.

Places to explore possible research questions:

http://libguides.bgsu.edu/gsw1120 --> red "Search strategies" tab --> links under "Need ideas for a paper topic?"

You can also READ magazines, newspapers, and online forums for ideas. Current events often contain issues that can be explored as research questions.

Understanding the Big Picture

Have you ever started reading for an essay and ended up confused by too many facts or too much information? It can feel like you're overwhelmed by bits of information that don't add up to a picture you can understand, as if you can't see the forest for the trees. Or you may find that your issue is just too narrow to be researchable. This can happen when you read material that's too detailed, before you have an overall “big picture” of the topic.

The early stages of reading in preparation for an assignment should be about getting the 'big picture' of the topic. To get this big picture, we’re going to read Wikipedia for articles and links associated with your topic: http://www.wikipedia.org/

Reading broadly will allow you to:

- begin to understand the issues involved in your research question
- understand multiple sides of an argument
- get an overview of theories related to the topic
- see possible answers to your research question
- decide what issues/information you need to continue researching.
Remember that while you read, you must always keep the research question in mind. The purpose of your reading is to gather information to answer the question, not just talk about the topic!

For example, suppose that you are interested in electric cars. You’re not really sure what your research question might be, but you’ve seen stuff on TV and the internet that they are cheaper to run and are supposed to be better for the environment . . . but, really, how can you write 8 pages on that? This probably isn’t even an arguable issue . . . now what?

The get the “big picture” of this topic, you decide to go to Wikipedia. Once there you do a simple search for “Electric Cars.” You come across a big article that talks about many aspects of the topic including:

- Energy Consumption
- Environmental Benefits
- Government Regulations
- Cost
- Convenience

Hmm . . . so there is certainly more to this electric car topic than you thought. From there you read through the wiki article and the links it contains. Getting this “big picture” allows you to isolate several argumentative angles that you hadn’t even known existed before. No doubt, as you continue to explore this topic you will find even more to talk about. The point is that Wikipedia helped you see more than you know existed. It helped you give your idea context and gave you a good idea of where to go with your research. While you won’t use Wikipedia as one of the sources in your essay (because, by the nature of wikis they can be unreliable), it certainly has given you some insight about your issue.

At this point you feel confident that you can adequately research the research question: Do the benefits of electric cars outweigh their negative aspects?

Once you’ve completed your research THEN you will be able to present the answer to your questions in the form of a working thesis.

Questions to ask yourself and your librarian as you seek the “big picture:”

- What is the general subject or topic you are interested in researching? Does there seem to be any debate within this topic area?
- What methods can you use to get the “big picture” about your general topic and to narrow down the relevant argumentative points needed to answer your research question?
- After you’ve isolated several relevant argumentative points, where might you search for good resources to bring to YOUR argument and answer YOUR research question?