

UNIV 200 library instruction FAQ

This document provides answers to the most frequently asked questions we receive from students after receiving library instruction in UNIV 200.

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Additional help

How do I contact my librarian after this class?

The librarian who taught your library session will be happy to help you throughout the entire semester! If they shared their email address, feel free to email them at any time. If you don't have their contact information, [use this calendar](#) to make an appointment with a librarian who works with UNIV 200 students (you can meet with them over Zoom or in person).

How can I get help from the library?

You can ask the library questions any hour that we're open — until 2 a.m. most nights! Send us a chat or text and get a response in under a minute! You can also send us an email, give us a call, or drop by the Information Desk. [Ask us!](#)

Advanced search

What other search strategies can I use for my research beyond what I learned today?

Your library session discussed a few search strategies and places to find sources, but there are many other strategies that will save you time and could help you find sources on your topic. [This research basics library guide](#) discusses many of these. I can also provide custom recommendations for your specific topic by email or appointment.

Cabell Library

When is Cabell Library open?

Cabell Library's hours for the current semester are posted on our website (library.vcu.edu) and next to the building's accessible door. On the [website](#), click on the "Today's Hours" link at the top of the page to see hours for the rest of the semester and for individual spaces like the Workshop.

Citation

Do all VCU databases have citation generators?

Most VCU Libraries databases, including the gold search box, have built-in citation generators. Remember to always double-check these against the appropriate style manual, because citation generators often have formatting errors.

Finding and borrowing books

How do I find and borrow print books?

Looking for print books? [This guide](#) walks you through how to find and borrow them. You can also send us a chat or drop by the Information Desk and library staff will help you find what you're looking for!

Non-VCU Libraries sources

What if VCU Libraries doesn't have the sources I need?

Need an article or book that VCU Libraries doesn't own? We can get it for you for free from another library. [Learn more here](#), or contact the library and we'll walk you through the steps!

Where can I find sources outside the library?

In addition to the millions of sources available from VCU Libraries, many are available for free online and will be available to you even after you graduate. [We list some of the best here](#).

Research question development

How can I tell if I have a good research question?

Your professor probably needs to approve your research question, so they're the best person to ask if your research question is appropriate for the assignment. From a library perspective, a good topic is usually fairly specific and isn't super recent to ensure there's been enough time for scholarly articles to have been published on it. [This library research guide has more tips](#).

Should I change my research question if I'm not finding sources on my topic?

There are lots of reasons you may not be finding many sources on your topic. Contact your librarian [using this calendar](#) to make an appointment and they will help you find sources.

Search strategy

How do I narrow my search results to see the most relevant sources?

The gold search box (and most library databases) have filters to help you narrow down your search results, just like online shopping websites do. One of the most useful filters is the publication date filter, where you can narrow your search to results to a specific timespan such as the last 5-10 years. The peer-reviewed filter will show you only sources published in scholarly journals. And the "Access Online" filter narrows your results to only those that are immediately available online.

What are the best keywords / search words to use for my research question?

Ideas for keywords / search words can come from many places: synonyms and broader/more specific words than those used in your research question, Wikipedia, database search results pages, and more. [This 4-minute video](#) explains how to brainstorm keywords.

How do I tell when I've read enough sources about my topic?

Don't worry, your professors don't expect you to find all the information out there on your topic! Most professors want you to find a few sources for each subtopic or claim you're making in your paper. Their assignment instructions will often tell you how many sources they expect for each stage of the research process.

Source evaluation

How can I tell if a source is trustworthy?

Figuring out whether a source is trustworthy for your specific topic involves looking at the source's author, where it was published, and a few other factors. [This library research guide](#) explains how to determine whether a source is trustworthy.

How can I tell if a source is scholarly / peer-reviewed?

There are a few factors that will help you determine if an article is scholarly, including who the author is and who published the article. The table on [this library research guide](#) explains each of these factors.

How can I tell which sources are best for my topic?

You don't have to read a whole article or book to figure out whether to use it for your paper. Look at the source's title first; if that looks relevant, read the abstract/summary. If that also looks relevant, read the conclusion. [This library research guide](#) explains each step of the process.

Where to search

How do I find the right database for my topic?

VCU Libraries has hundreds of databases, so how do you choose the right one(s)? One of the best places to start is by determining what subject/discipline your topic is, and finding a [library research guide on that subject](#). The first page of those research guides recommend the best databases to start with for each subject. If you'd like an even shorter list of databases to work from, the [UNIV 200 guide](#) recommends one or two databases per subject.

What do I need to know about the library's databases?

VCU Libraries' databases put millions of sources at your fingertips! Many databases are updated daily with newly published articles. All library databases include credible sources; just keep in mind that some sources will be popular or substantive (that is, not peer-reviewed). There's unique content in each database, though some content appears in multiple databases.

How do I access newspapers online?

You can access the New York Times, Washington Post, Richmond Times-Dispatch, and thousands of other newspapers for free through VCU Libraries! [This library research guide](#) explains how to access them.

How do I find sources if my research topic is related to multiple subjects or isn't academic?

The gold search box on the [library website](#) and the interdisciplinary database [Academic Search Complete](#) both have sources on just about every topic, making them a great place to start your research.