

Developing a Search Strategy lesson plan

Learning outcomes

- *The student will be able to frame their research by developing a “researchable” question or topic in order to create a search strategy.*
- *The student will be able to find sources including books and articles using VCU Libraries Search in order to advance his/her research goals.*

Note: This is a lengthy lesson plan. As written here, the full lesson will take about **30 minutes**, not including facilitated searching at the end. The instructor might consider splitting the lesson over two class periods.

Pre-activity prep

- Advise students to bring their laptops to class
- On instructor podium computer, pull up the following:
 - [Picking Your Topic IS Research! video \(3 minutes, 10 seconds\)](#)
 - [Web timer](#)
 - [VCU Libraries Interlibrary Loan page](#)
 - [VCU Libraries Ask Us page](#)
- Advise students to get out/pull up their draft research questions as they’re walking in to class

Activity introduction

- Consider combining this lesson with media/activities from the [Keyword Development topic](#) so students understand that this lesson is part of the search strategy development process and can supplement their in-class searching with additional search terms.

Refining a research question (15 minutes)

- Picking your topic is research
 - Your research question will evolve as you find sources, perhaps becoming more specific or perhaps changing course slightly, based on the information you find. That’s okay!
 - This 3-minute video explains how that process works: [Picking Your Topic IS Research!](#)
- Ask class: keeping in mind what we just learned from the video, what do you think makes a research question “researchable” or not? Example responses:
 - Too-specific or too-new (for example, if you wanted to research a popular TV show that aired a few weeks ago) research questions won’t have enough or any scholarly articles written on them
 - Too-broad questions can’t be answered in a 5-7 page paper
 - If the question has already been settled/proven (e.g., that cigarette-smoking causes lung cancer), an argument can’t be made
 - Opinion- or faith-based questions won’t have evidence-based scholarly sources written about them
 - Questions about events that just happened won’t have scholarly sources written about them because the publishing process takes several months or longer

- Let's practice evaluating a few research questions. Are these examples good, researchable questions? Why or why not? If not, how would you make them more researchable?
 - o Why do things happen for a reason? (*side note: this was a real research question a student asked in a previous UNIV 200 class!*)
 - Too broad; faith-based question
 - Question needs to be rewritten
 - o What effect do house plants have on people?
 - Too broad
 - Could be modified by specifying a type of effect (physiological/psychological, etc.), type of plant, or type of people
 - o How did the underground punk music scene influence Richmond politics in the 1980s?
 - Too specific; not likely to be any scholarly sources on this topic
 - Could be modified by removing 'Richmond'
- Application to students' questions
 - o Ask students to apply these concepts with their own research question. Based on what we've covered, are there any changes you could make to your research question?
 - o Set timer for 2-3 minutes

Finding background information (3 minutes)

- Now that you've decided on a topic, where can you get background information on it?
 - o Wikipedia is a great place to start
 - In college, you're usually writing papers on stuff you don't know about. Scholarly articles are sometimes hard to read—not great for familiarizing yourself with a brand-new topic.
 - By skimming the sections in a Wikipedia article, you can identify ways to narrow down your research topic.
 - You'll also see technical language on your topic sprinkled through its Wikipedia page, which can help you figure out which terms scholars are using on your topic so you can use those to search with.
 - o BUT: don't cite Wikipedia
 - It's time to move on to library resources when:
 - You've got a basic understanding of your topic, have narrowed your topic down, and have some ideas of words to search with.

Introduction to VCU Libraries Search/the gold search box (5 minutes)

- The VCU Libraries Search ("the gold search box") is a search tool that allows you to find nearly everything VCU Libraries owns or has access to. This includes:
 - o Physical items you can check out, like books and DVDs
 - o Physical items you *cannot* check out, like materials in Special Collections and Archives (you can go to SCA and look at these items in person, but not take them home - note that their hours are not the same as the building hours)
 - o Online items you can view immediately, such as ebooks, articles, and news
- Not everything you'll find in the VCU Libraries search is "scholarly" or "academic," but much of it leans in that direction.

- Let's try a search! Go to the gold box at library.vcu.edu and type in **social media anxiety** (no need to use the word "and" between the terms).
 - You'll probably get a lot of results, many of which are irrelevant. You can narrow those down using the limiters on the right side of the page. For example, you can select "peer-reviewed" to see *only* articles published in scholarly journals. Or you can select "On Shelf" for books that are currently available for checkout at Cabell or Tompkins-McCaw Library.
 - Another option is to use the Publication Date filter to limit your search to items published within a set period of time, such as the last decade.
- If you see an online item that interests you, click the title and more information--including a link to the full text under "View It"--will appear. Usually, this includes an abstract or summary of the item.
- Occasionally, VCU Libraries does not have the full text of an article or book. In that case, either use [Interlibrary Loan](#) to request a copy (you can do this with physical items, like books, as well as with articles) or [contact the library](#) for help.
- If you see a physical book you're interested in, note whether the book is currently available (if not, you can use Interlibrary Loan to request a copy), which library it's in (Cabell or Tompkins-McCaw), which floor it's on, and the call number. Use that information to locate the book, take it to the information desk on the first floor, and use your VCU card to check it out. If you need help finding a book on the shelf, [contact the library](#) or ask at the information desk on the first floor!

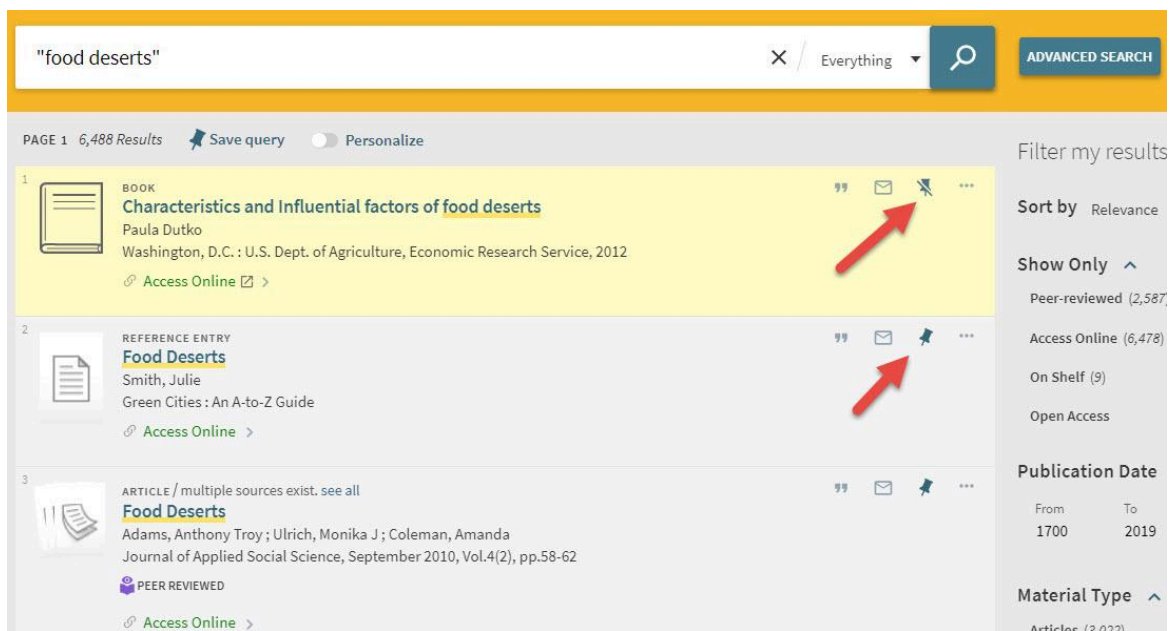
Using different search terms (4 minutes; can be expanded with activities from Keyword Development topic)

- You will rarely find everything you need with one search. Consider mixing and matching search terms to find the items best suited for your research. For example, you can modify the search we used earlier in a variety of ways, depending on what you're looking for:
 - **Facebook anxiety**
 - **Social media depression**
 - **Social media anxiety teenagers**
 - **Loneliness social media**
 - **FOMO (fear of missing out)**
 - ...and many more!
- You can also use "quotation marks" around a phrase to keep it together. For example, a search for "**social media**" will lead to fewer but more relevant results than **social media** without quotation marks, since with the quotation marks, it searches for the specific phrase and not for the two words separately.
- Generally speaking, the more general your terms are, the more results you will get; the more specific your terms, the fewer results you will get. **Facebook** yields fewer results than **social media**; **pugs** yields fewer results than **dogs**
- On that same note, the more terms you use, the fewer results you will see. **Facebook depression teenagers** yields fewer results than just **Facebook**; **pugs health diet** yields

fewer results than just **pugs** -- fewer terms is often a good thing, since you are looking for more relevant results rather than simply the most results possible.

Saving results in VCU Libraries Search (2 minutes)

- As you are searching, there are a number of ways you can save your search results. Do a search in the gold box. When you are on the results page, look in the top right corner of the window. You'll see a neon blue link that says "sign in." Click on it and sign in to your personal library account.
- Once you have done that, start searching. Anything that looks interesting can be added to your "Favorites" by clicking the icon that looks like a pin next to the title:



- To see all your "Favorites," click the bigger icon that looks like a pin in the top right of the window (next to where you clicked to log in). All items will remain in your Favorites until you delete them--as long as you save them when you are logged into your account! (If you add items while not logged in, they may be deleted if you clear your history or restart your computer.)

Facilitated search time

- Spend the remainder of class looking for sources for the assignment
- Note: students will likely run into problems finding sources, even after a lesson on how to search. This is part of the learning process and you can always refer the student to the library for additional research assistance. Also, if there are broken links in the VCU Libraries Search, please reach out to a librarian or email library@vcu.edu about the issue and we will work on fixing it.