1. Identify and Develop Your Topic
To choose a topic, discuss topic ideas with your professor or subject librarian, and try browsing recent research in areas of interest, or looking at current events.

To develop a topic, try to state it as a question. For example, instead of "athletics increase college revenue," you might ask, "Do athletics programs increase revenue at colleges, and does this increase only impact the athletics programs?"

Also, think of synonyms and alternative ways to phrase the main concepts and keywords in your topic. In our example, the most important keywords are "athletics programs," "revenue," and "college." You might replace "athletics programs" with "sports programs" or "sports teams," or even specific sports such as football.

2. Find Background Information
Look for a source with a broad overview of the topic so you can understand how your specific research question fits into the broader context of the topic.

Encyclopedias, dictionaries, and textbooks are all good places to look for general overviews. You can even use online sources like Wikipedia at this point, as long as you remember that they may not be entirely accurate.

In general, information found at this stage of the research process, and the sources used, are not cited in the final product.

At this point, you may decide to further refine or change your research question. In fact, if you struggled to come up with a question, it's often useful to get some background information before deciding on a final topic.
3. Find Potential Resources
You can find a variety of resources that can guide you in your research process and/or be cited in your final product. Exactly which types of sources you use depends on your research topic.

**Books & Ebooks** should only be used for topics where the field is slower to develop. Neuroscience, for example, is such a fast-paced field that books are going to contain outdated information. You do not need to use an entire book – many academic books contain chapters written by multiple authors, and you can use a single chapter.

*Where to look:* Library Catalog. If you don’t find what you’re looking for, you can request an item be sent to you through interlibrary loan.

**Scholarly Journal Articles** are the primary resource for most academic research topics. Some articles and journals are more reputable than others; as you become familiar with the field, you will learn the names of the most reliable journals. In the meantime, ask your professor for suggestions.

*Where to look:* Library databases. Check the subject guide for your area to find databases that will work well for your topic.

**Other Sources:** Newspapers, magazines, government data, documentaries and films, and audio recordings are some of the other sources you might use, depending on your topic.

*Where to look:* Library catalog and databases. Ask a librarian for specific suggestions.

4. Evaluate What You Find
Critically read through the sources you’ve selected, keeping your research question in mind as you go.

Consider rejecting sources that don’t seem to be useful. Expect to read more sources than you actually use in your final product. Reading and rejecting sources is not a waste of time, as you are still gaining knowledge about the context for your topic.

With research articles, pay careful attention to the methods used and the discussion of the results, and watch out for potential errors or biases that might invalidate the results.

Jot down a few notes summarizing what you think are the key points, especially as they relate to your research question. Highlight passages that could be useful to quote or incorporate into your final product, and take note of any references to other sources you might find useful.

5. Cite Your Sources
You are probably aware of the concerns about plagiarism, but citing sources is also important because it allows your audience to locate those sources for themselves, if they’re interested in learning more about the topic.

In formal and academic forums, however, properly formatted citations are expected. The most commonly used styles are MLA (Modern Language Association), APA (American Psychological Association), Chicago (The Chicago Manual of Style), and Turabian (A Manual for Writers by Kate Turabian). If you’re not sure which to use, ask your professor what style they prefer.