

Establishing a Research Plan

- [Selecting an Argumentative Academic Topic](#)
- [Narrowing the Topic](#)
- [Developing a Research Question](#)
- [Finding Background Information](#)
- [Conducting a Library Search](#)
- [Recording Source Information](#)
- [Forming a Working Thesis Statement](#)

Selecting an Argumentative Academic Topic

One of the most important and most difficult things to do when writing a research paper is to select a good topic. In order to choose the right topic, you should consider several important aspects of the assignment.

When choosing a topic for an argumentative topic, you must

- understand the writing assignment thoroughly
- identify the audience
- know the purpose of the paper
- be aware of the length of the paper
- know which documentation style to use
- estimate the time required to write the paper accurately
- be sure of resource availability
- feel confident about your ability to read information about the topic
- be comfortable with the vocabulary or key words connected to the topic
- consider your own interests and personal feelings about the topic
- remain flexible in your initial attitude about the topic
- be open to new ideas
- be able to form a question about the topic

When choosing an argumentative academic topic, you must not

- select a topic that is too broad or big
- choose a topic that is too narrow or small
- pick a topic that is too controversial or emotional
- select a topic that is too technical
- choose a topic that is dated, non-relevant
- pick an old topic that has been written about often
- be too familiar with the topic
- have intense personal experience with the topic
- be emotional about the topic
- have your mind made up about the topic before you start investigating

If you need help finding a topic you could try some of these suggestions:

- Skim a recent issue of a news magazine. Do not limit yourself to current events. Be sure to skim articles about health, science, business, and social issues. Make a list of subjects that interest you.
- Read the editorials of a local newspaper. Are there any local issues that are interesting?
- Look through a general subject index in the library. Use the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Periodical Abstracts*, or the *Social Science Index*, and make note of any subjects that interest you.
- Watch an investigative television show, such as *Dateline*, *60 Minutes*, or *20/20* in order to see if any issues are interesting to you.
- Go to public television's website at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline> to check out their list of topics. See what is on the home page of major television corporations, such as CNN, MSNBC, ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox News, etc.
- Use other Internet sources to find ideas for your research paper topic. Here are some sites that may be very useful.

<http://www.ccc.commnet.edu/libroot/hotpapertopics.HTM>

This is a site from Capitol Community College in Connecticut. It lists research paper topics in alphabetical order. Browse the list, making note of two or three topics that interest you.:

<http://www.questia.com/>

This commercial site offers a link to the top controversial/argumentative topics. The site also has information about how to write a research paper, and it provides an on-line library of articles. You must be a subscriber to use the library, but you can view the topic list for free.

<http://www.gc.maricopa.edu/English/topicarg.html>

This Glendale Community College site from Arizona lists argumentative topics, along with links to information about the topics.

<http://kclibrary.nhmccd.edu/hot-topics.html>

The Kingwood College Library in Texas has a site that lists acceptable argumentative research paper topics and provides links to more information about each topic.

<http://library.sau.edu/bestinfo/Hot/hotindex.htm>

This site from St. Ambrose University in Iowa not only lists argumentative topics but also provides links to information about the topics,

<http://iws.ohiolink.edu/~sg-ysu/topex.html>

This site from the Ohio university system lists a few topics that have been successful topics in their universities, but it also has a link explaining how to use the Internet to find sources. In addition, there is a link to a worksheet that can help you to locate a topic.

<http://iii.library.unt.edu/>

Don't forget to use UNT's library system for help in choosing a topic: This UNT site provides the researcher with search options. By searching for your subject, you can discover how much information is available about your topic.

<http://www.library.unt.edu/services.htm>

This UNT site offers information about library tours and reference assistance.

EVALUATING TOPIC CHOICES (VIEW QUESTIONS)

Narrowing the Topic

After you have selected the topic, try to give the topic a focus. One way to do this is to think about types of development. Can your topic be developed by showing the causes or effects of a specific situation? Is the best way to develop your topic by using comparison/contrast or advantages/disadvantages? Perhaps explaining the problem and offering solutions is a good way to approach developing your topic. After selecting your developmental pattern or controlling idea, you will have good keywords to use when you begin your research.

EVALUATING NARROWED TOPICS (VIEW QUESTIONS)

Developing a Research Question

After you have narrowed your topic, the next step is to form a research question. Forming a research question will help you be more efficient when you are doing research and when you are writing your preliminary thesis statement. Read these three steps as an example of how one writer developed a research question. Then follow these steps with your own topic.

Step # 1

For example, if you have chosen to write your research paper about the effect of video games on children, start by brainstorming. Make a list of any questions that you might have about the subject. Spend 5-10 minutes writing questions. Don't erase anything. Write as fast as you can for as long as you can.

Effect of video games on children:

- Are children harmed by video games?
- Does playing video games provide any benefits to children?
- Is a child's power of concentration helped by playing video games?
- Do children learn academic skills by playing video games?
- Does playing video games cause isolation from society?
- Does playing video games help children develop eye-hand coordination?
- Are video games a substitute babysitter?
- Do video games introduce new concepts to children?
- Is there any difference between the way boys and girls respond to video games?
- Can video games be a learning tool for moral behavior?

- Should parents censor children's video games?
- How much time spent playing video games is too much?
- What does the video game rating system mean?
- Is there any connection between the amount of time spent playing video games and grades children get on their school report cards?

Step # 2

Examine your list of questions. Group the questions together according to the type of information the question is asking about. This will help you understand what kind of information you are really interested in researching.

Group A: Advantages of video games

1. Does playing video games provide any benefits to children?
2. Is a child's power of concentration helped by playing video games?
3. Do children learn academic skills by playing video games?
4. Does playing video games help children develop eye-hand coordination?
5. Do video games introduce new concepts to children?
6. Can video games be a learning tool for moral behavior?

Group B: Disadvantages of video games

1. Are children harmed by video games?
2. Does playing video games cause isolation from society?
3. Are video games a substitute babysitter?

Group C: Neither Advantages or Disadvantages (Need more information)

1. Is there any difference between the way boys and girls respond to video games?
2. Should parents censor children's video games?
3. How much time spent playing video games is too much?
4. What does the video game rating system mean?
5. Is there any connection between the amount of time spent playing video games and grades children get on their school report cards?

From the grouping of the questions, it appears that the writer is more interested in doing research about the benefits or advantages of video games for children.

Step # 3

Write a preliminary research question. Then make a research plan.

- The initial research question: What are the advantages of playing video games for children?
- Key words to use when finding sources: *advantages, video+games, children*

- When researching, don't forget to read about the disadvantages of children playing video games because you will need that information in the introduction before beginning to refute it. Key words: *disadvantages, video+games, children*
- Be flexible. After you read information about video games and answer some of the questions in Group C, you may want to change your topic to the harmful effects of playing video games

Finding Background Information

Before you begin researching a specific area of your topic, it is a good idea to read some general information. Getting historical information will help you to understand the broad scope of related information. Looking up important key words in the dictionary will make reading about the topic more efficient. If it is appropriate, reading information in general magazines, journals, or newspapers might provide you with a better understanding of the topic. Doing these things will help you to build a working vocabulary in the area of your research and will provide you with essential knowledge about the topic.

For general information, there are many resources available to you:

- For general information, look up your topic on a free online encyclopedia.

<http://encarta.msn.com/>
<http://www.encyclopedia.com/>
<http://www.bartleby.com/65/>
<http://www.infoplease.com/>
<http://www.factmonster.com/>
<http://www.cam-info.net/enc.html>
<http://www.reference.com/encyclopedia/>
<http://www.libraryspot.com/>

- You can also subscribe to an online encyclopedia

<http://www.britannica.com/>
<http://www2.worldbook.com/>

- Free online dictionaries are also available.

<http://www.m-w.com/>
<http://www.yourdictionary.com/>
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
<http://www.bartleby.com/61/>
<http://www.refdesk.com/factdict.html>

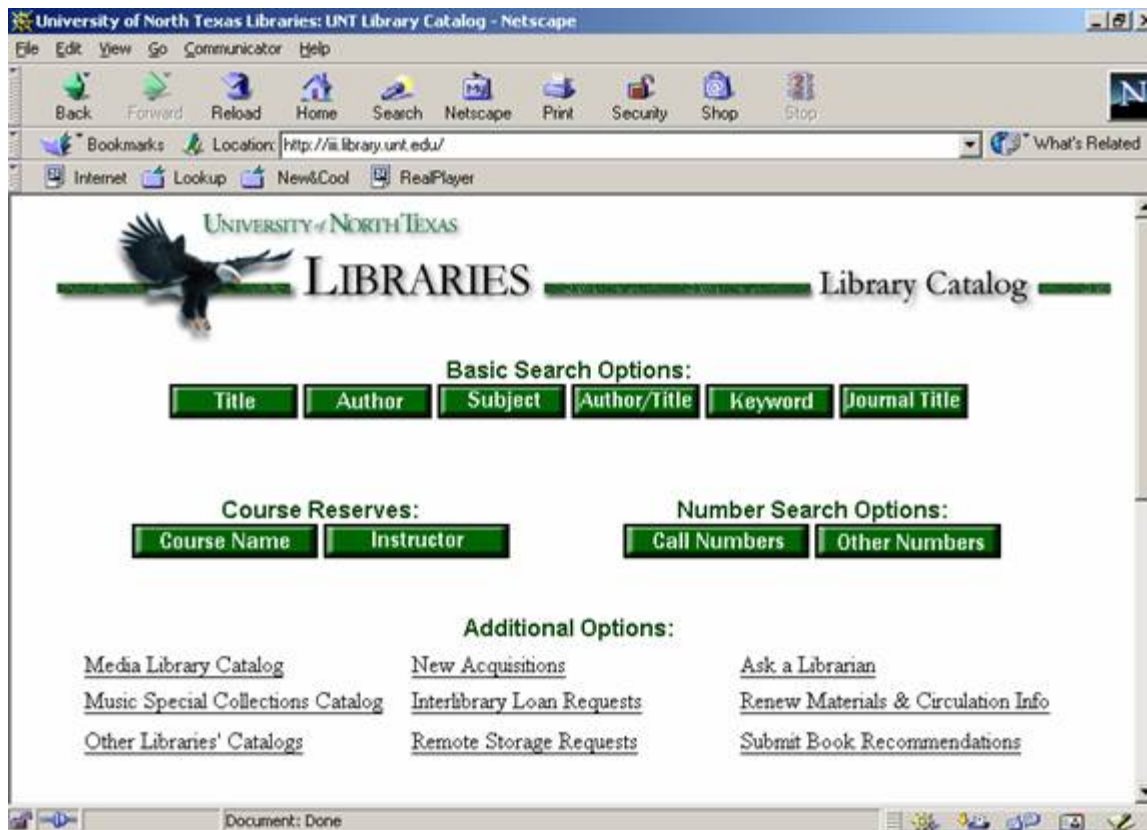
- Scan through research guides and abstracts in the library. There are many general resources that can be used.

- The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature
 - The Social Science and Humanities Index
 - Almanacs. Abstracts, Indexes
 - Current magazines and journals
 - Newspapers
- Also use the library's databases, <http://iii.library.unt.edu/>, to find out if there is any information about your topic in the library. If there is not a lot of information available or if the information is located in books that are currently checked out, you may need to change the focus of your topic, or you may need to switch to a new topic.

Conducting a Library Search

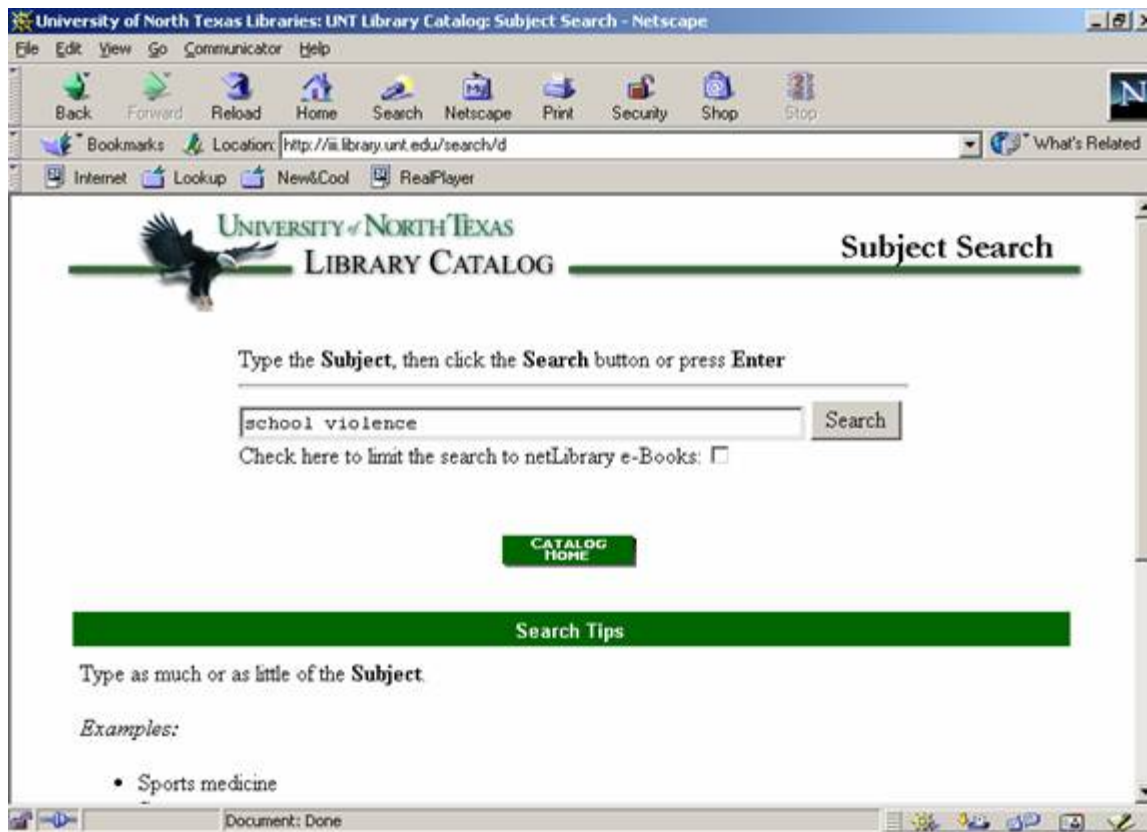
Step # 1

Click on the subject index to find information about your topic.



Step # 2

The subject index will appear. Type the key words to identify your topic in the subject box. Be sure that you spell all of the words correctly. Click on the search box.



Step # 3

Select a category to investigate. In this case, the category of “School Violence” has 20 entries, so it may be a good place to start. Double click.

The screenshot shows a Netscape browser window titled "University of North Texas Libraries / All Locations - Netscape". The address bar contains the URL "http://li.library.unt.edu/search/d?SEARCH=school+violence". The search results page displays a table of subjects with columns for "Num", "Mark", "SUBJECTS (1-12 of 57)", "Year", and "Entries Found". The entry for "School Violence" is selected with a checkmark in the "Mark" column and has 20 entries found.

Num	Mark	SUBJECTS (1-12 of 57)	Year	Entries Found
1		School Violence -- See also -- School Vandalism		1
2	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	School Violence		20
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence Australia Prevention	2001	1
4	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence Canada Case Studies		2
5	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence Colorado Littleton		3
6	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence Colorado Prevention Handbooks Manuals Etc	c1999	1
7	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence Cross Cultural Studies	c1998	1
8	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence Drama	2003	1
9	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence England	c1984	1
10	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence European Union Countries	2003	1
11	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence European Union Countries Prevention	2003	1

Step # 4

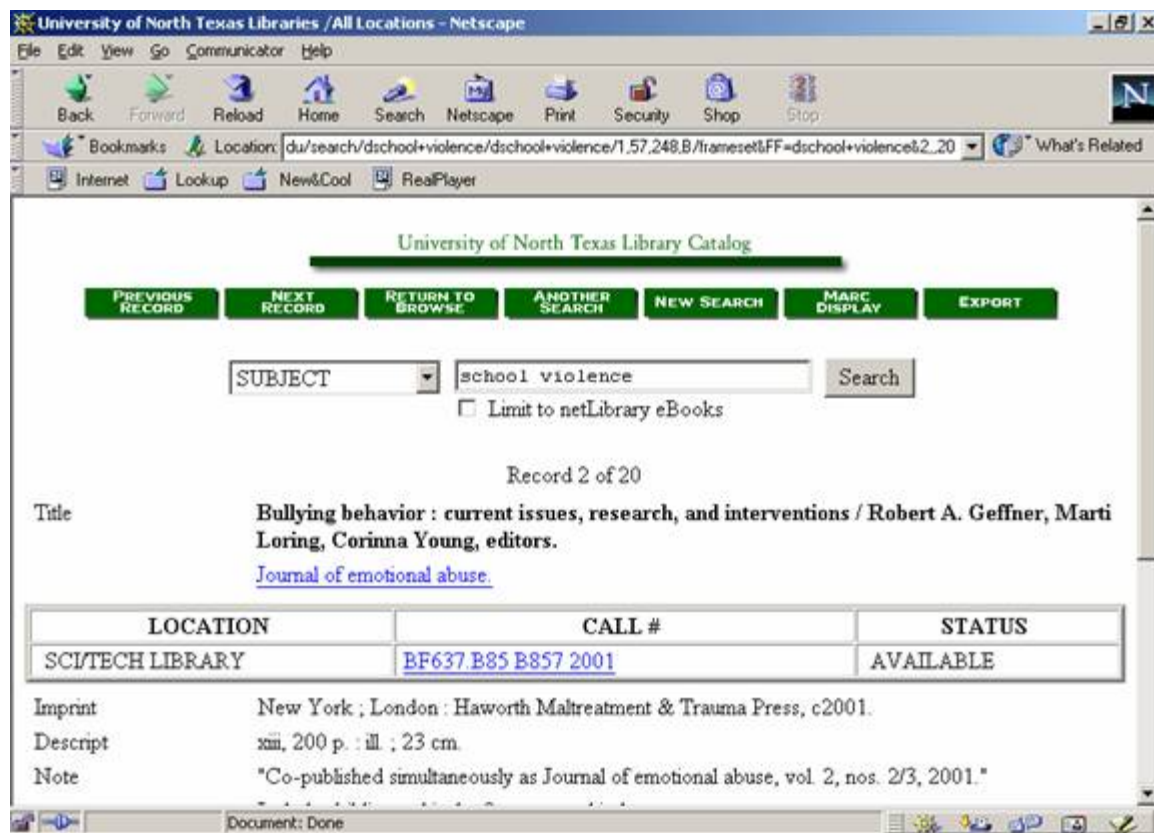
Scan the list of titles. Look for something that will help focus your paper. The third entry about bullying looks like it might be interesting. Find out more about it. Double click.

The screenshot shows a Netscape browser window titled "University of North Texas Libraries / All Locations - Netscape". The address bar contains the URL "http://ii.library.unt.edu/search/d?SEARCH=school+violence". The search results are displayed in a table with the following data:

Num	Mark	SUBJECTS (1-12 of 57)	Year	Entries 248 Found
1		School Violence -- See also -- School Vandalism		1
2	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	School Violence		20
3	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence Australia Prevention	2001	1
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8	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence Drama	2003	1
9	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence England	c1984	1
10	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence European Union Countries	2003	1
11	<input type="checkbox"/>	School Violence European Union Countries Prevention	2003	1

Step # 5

Find out what subjects are covered in the book, where it is located, and whether or not it is available. Make note of the location, the call number, and the status. Note that the book was published in 1996, so the information is current. It also contains a bibliography (references), so the writer can view what other resources might be of use. The emphasis of the book seems to be on identifying bullying and preventing it. This might make a good argumentative topic, narrowing down the large topic of school violence to one aspect of violence: bullying. The development pattern suggested is problem-solution. In addition to giving you a narrowed topic and a developmental pattern, this information can give direction to your search for specific information. Remember, when you find this book in Willis Library, be sure to look to the right and to the left of the book. Books located next to Rigby's book will mostly likely be about the same topic.



The screenshot shows a Netscape browser window displaying the University of North Texas Library Catalog. The search results for "school violence" are shown, with the first record being "Bullying behavior : current issues, research, and interventions / Robert A. Geffner, Marti Loring, Corinna Young, editors." The record is available at the SCI/TECH LIBRARY with call number BF637.B85 B857 2001.

University of North Texas Library Catalog

PREVIOUS RECORD NEXT RECORD RETURN TO BROWSE ANOTHER SEARCH NEW SEARCH MARC DISPLAY EXPORT

SUBJECT school violence Search
 Limit to netLibrary eBooks

Record 2 of 20

Title **Bullying behavior : current issues, research, and interventions / Robert A. Geffner, Marti Loring, Corinna Young, editors.**
[Journal of emotional abuse.](#)

LOCATION	CALL #	STATUS
SCI/TECH LIBRARY	BF637.B85 B857 2001	AVAILABLE

Imprint New York ; London : Haworth Maltreatment & Trauma Press, c2001.
Descript xiii, 200 p. : ill. ; 23 cm.
Note "Co-published simultaneously as Journal of emotional abuse, vol. 2, nos. 2/3, 2001."

Step # 6

Repeat the first 5 steps as often as it takes to find a suitable topic with enough information for your research paper.

Recording Source Information

When you begin searching for sources, be sure to write down basic information about everything you read, listen to, or watch on a note card. At the end of your research paper project, these note cards will provide you with the information necessary to write your reference or works cited page. You may not use all of the source information note cards on the final draft of your reference page, but you need to make a card for each piece of information you read because you cannot know at the beginning of your research which sources will actually be used. Do not worry about punctuation or order of the information on the note cards. Simply make sure that you record all of the vital information. If you are not sure about which information to put on the note card, look at a sample APA reference page in **Finalizing a final works cited page**.

- Full name of all authors, editors, or translators
- Full name of publication: book, journal, newspaper, song, movie
- Full name of article: journal, magazine, newspaper, etc.
- Publication date: book, journal, newspaper
- Publisher and city of publication: book
- Web address: Internet source
- Name of Web database and item number: Internet source
- Retrieval date: Internet source
- Page number and length: book, journal, newspaper
- Paragraph number and length: Internet source
- Other information:
- Volume number: journal, magazine
- Edition: book
- Section number or letter: newspaper
- Producer: song, television program, movie

Forming a Working Thesis Statement

Before you begin to do research, it is a good idea to have a working or preliminary thesis statement because it will help you to focus your search. If, for example, your topic is smoking, you could do research about a wide variety of topics, including smoking risks when pregnant, tobacco's effect on asthma, how to quit smoking, health costs because of smoking, cigar smoking vs. cigarette smoking, secondhand smoke, increased number of teenagers beginning to smoke, movies endorsing smoking, and smoking and the digestive system. If you start the research process before forming a working thesis statement, you will waste time collecting information that you will not be able to use in your research paper.

Your working thesis statement must have three major parts:

Part 1: The subject

Form your working thesis statement by narrowing the topic as much as you can. Make sure that you have a single topic. Do not try to discuss or do research on more than one topic at a time. As you gather information, be flexible. You may find that you'll need to change the subject of your thesis statement to make it narrower or broader.

Part 2: The opinion about the subject

When readers look at your working thesis statement, they should have no problem identifying exactly what your opinion about the topic is. They will know whether you are in favor or opposed to the idea being discussed. They will know what changes, if any, you want to be made. They will understand how you feel about the topic. After you read several sources, you may find that your attitude changes. In that case, change your working thesis.

Part 3: The pattern of development

The working thesis statement should hint at the pattern of development that will be used in the paper. Do you plan to give the reader reasons to support your ideas? Is your topic better suited to discuss advantages or disadvantages? Should you use cause or effect development? Perhaps classification would be better. Knowing what kind of developmental pattern you would like to use will also help you limit your research. Be aware that your pattern also could change as you learn more about your topic. If you change your approach to the subject, be sure to change your working thesis to include the new pattern of development.

[EVALUATING WORKING THESIS STATEMENTS \(VIEW QUESTIONS\)](#)