STEP 1. CHOOSE A TOPIC

Here is an example of a topic/problem statement:

**An increase in police presence in a given area in the United States will greatly reduce the occurrence of crime, but it will not prove as an effective means in the fight against crime in the long term.**

Note that the focus is on a limited aspect – not just police presence, but police presence within a given area regarding the occurrence of crime.  The problem is the issue of needing to fight/reduce crime, the proposed solution is increased police presence.

Let’s suppose your interest lies in the topic of violent crime - - that is too broad, so narrow to victims of violent crime.  However, that is still quite broad, so narrow it further to state funded programs for victims of violent crime.

A word of caution is necessary, be sure not to narrow it too much.  The above narrowed topic would become too limited if you went with state funded programs for victims of the violent crime of rape as there may not be enough literature available.  Often, too narrow of a topic also leads to complications in finding information that is divided into extremely specific categories.

Please also note, instructor approval of your topic/problem statement is required prior to proceeding with full-scale research and writing.  If you are uncertain as to what is expected of you in completing the assignment or project, re-read your assignment sheet carefully and ASK your instructor for clarification.  Also note that there are recommended readings at the end of each weekly lesson.

In summary, select a subject you can manage – do a cursory review of the databases (see discussion below as how to effectively do this).  Avoid subjects that are too technical, learned, or specialized.  Avoid topics that have only a very narrow range of source materials.

STEP 2. FIND INFORMATION

Surf the Net.

Do this to find general or background information, but also check the online library databases, i.e., SAGE, EBSCO Host, Pro Quest, and Lexis Nexis.  In addition, the library also contains ebooks.  When using these databases, click the advanced search option (bottom left) and set the date range for the past 5 years to ensure the information you find is current.  The 5-year range is considered current in terms of research.

Also, you need to limit the search to peer-reviewed sources.  Magazines, theses, and dissertations are not peer-reviewed, therefore they should not be used in terms of citing them within your literature review.  Books may be used, although, very sparingly and not as the primary source (i.e., heavily cited throughout the document and or as a sole support for a major point).

Below is a capture of the advanced search with the options needing to be indicated – note the range date is set for 5 years.  Language is an option you can choose or ignore.  The “Show only” option has full text online marked – this is your choice as some articles you would have to request a copy be sent and it usually costs.  Definitely check the peer-reviewed option.

If using a search engine, be sure to pay attention to domain name extensions, e.g., .edu (educational institution), .gov (government), or .org (non-profit organization).  These sites represent institutions and tend to be more reliable, but be watchful of possible political bias in some government sites.  Be selective of .com (commercial) sites.  Many .com sites are excellent; however, a large number of them contain advertisements for products and nothing else.  Also be wary of the millions of personal home pages and blogs on the Net.  It has been my experience that the quality of information contained in personal home pages varies greatly; I therefore discourage their use.  Additionally, Wikipedia is NOT an acceptable or reliable source.  Information based on a Wikipedia source will not be accepted.

As you gather your resources, jot down full bibliographical information (author, title, place of publication, publisher/journal name, date of publication, page numbers, URLs, DOIs, creation or modification dates on Web pages, and your date of access) on your work sheet, printout, or enter the information on your laptop or desktop computer for later retrieval.  If printing from the Internet, it is wise to set up the browser to print the URL and date of access for every page.  Remember that an article without bibliographical information is useless since you cannot cite its source.  (All recommended readings at the end of each week are listed in APA format like you will need to do – use as a template.)

Another tip to searching is to vary your search terms and phrases, like when searching for articles under the topic of police presence – try: police presence, law enforcement presence, police community presence, law enforcement community presence, crime prevention via police presence, crime prevention via law enforcement presence, etc.  Try placing quotation marks around the phrase to limit results to just that exact wording or using both terms in the search separated by a backslash, like: police/law enforcement presence.  Note that what works with one database doesn’t necessarily work with a different one.  Also, sometimes it is necessary to start broad and then narrow the search based on what appears.

\*Note: In the key word search box AND means you want both phrases; OR means either one.

This new listing of articles may be worthwhile skimming through as you can then quickly tell if you are headed the right direction or need to add further limitations.  For example, the first three entries are about South African and Japanese crime prevention.  Since your focus is the United States, you can ignore these - - although, sometimes the ideas presented as being effective/ineffective in other countries, may support your study plans and add value to the literature review, so it may be wise to at least read the abstract.

Notice if that the name of journal was abbreviated in the text. If so, you will likely need to Google the abbreviated form to find the entire name - or you can click on the “cite” link (upper right-hand side) to obtain the citation.  However, be warned that the database does not always align with APA.  More regarding APA is presented in week 3.

STEP 3. STATE YOUR THESIS

Do some critical thinking and write your topic/problem statement down in one sentence.  The main portion of your paper will consist of support and documentation of this being a problem needing to be researched or studied.