Step 2
How do I approach my assignment

Formulating your topic

Now that you have an idea of what you are going to write about you need to jot down everything you know about the topic and anything that you want to find out. This will form the basis of your search strategy. Assignment planning tools like those featured below are a good first step to help identify keywords that represent your topic, raise key issues and concepts and identify gaps in your knowledge.

Try them and decide which is best for you.

Freewriting

This is where you just allocate ten minutes or so to just write down anything and everything that you know about the topic. Try not to stop to think just keep writing even if it’s “I can’t think of anything else to write”. The idea is to really focus your mind on the topic and your existing knowledge. It will also help in making you aware of gaps that need to be filled. Don’t worry about spelling or grammar at this stage, just get the ideas down.

Follow this link for an explanation and an example of freewriting. The site also gives you a box for your own freewriting exercise complete with an automatic 10 minute, 8 minute or 5 minute timer.

http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/brainstorm_free_write.htm

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is similar, but instead of a constant flow of words you jot down key words and ideas. Brainstorming is often done in a group to encourage new ideas and to bounce ideas off one another that in turn may spark new ideas, but you can do it on your own.

Follow this link for examples of brainstorming techniques http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brainstorming
Concept Mapping

Concept mapping is similar to brainstorming but uses a mapping process so you make connections with lines rather than sticking to a hierarchical form. You start with your central topic in the middle of a large blank sheet of paper and you make connections.

Follow this link for a short tutorial on mind mapping:


Cubing

Cubing encourages you to look at a topic from six different angles.

The Six Sides of the Cube are:
1. Describe it - How would you describe the issue/topic? Describe key points
2. Compare it –What is it similar to?
3. Associate it - How does the topic connect to other issues/subjects? How does this decision/event connect to other decisions/events? How does this person/character relate to other people/characters?
4. Analyze it - How would you break the problem/issue into smaller parts?
5. Apply it - How does it help you understand other topics/issues?
6. Argue for/against it - adopt a viewpoint
   - I am for/against this because ...
   - This works/does not work because...
   - I agree/disagree because...

Follow these links for examples of cubing

http://users.humboldt.edu/tduckart/Cubing.htm
http://writing2.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/cubing.html

Heuristics

Heuristics encourages you to interview yourself to tease out everything you know about a topic.

Now that you have thought about your topic you can begin to consider the type of information that will help in your research.

**What type of information will help me?**

- Primary v secondary
- Scholarly v general interest
- Current v historical
- Factual and/or statistical information. This can be useful in providing evidence to back up argument.
- Where will I find information on my topic? Organisational websites, government websites.

**Primary sources** could be considered as 'original' or 'first-hand' sources.

Journal articles, reports and conference papers which present the results of original research are termed primary literature whether they're in print or electronic format.

- Sets of data such as statistics and lab results are also primary sources as are documents produced at the time of an event e.g. diaries, photographs, court records, newspaper reports.

**Secondary sources** interpret, analyse or repackage primary material.

Examples of secondary sources are textbooks and review articles. These aim to summarise and explain previously published work rather than present the results of original work.

- Abstracts, indexes, and databases are also secondary sources. These are used to identify relevant primary and secondary literature

**Where am I going to find the information?**

Begin to test your topic by trying out some of your keywords in tools like
- **iFind ([ifind.swan.ac.uk](http://ifind.swan.ac.uk))**: Physical stock held within the library, which includes books, journals, DVDs and videos. Online resources such as e-books, online journals/articles and databases.
- **Subject databases ([http://www.swansea.ac.uk/library/subjectsupport/](http://www.swansea.ac.uk/library/subjectsupport/))**: Visit the library subject support pages to find out about the specialist databases and resources for your subject.

**Too many result?**

You will have to think about how you can refine your search. Revisit your keywords. Can you think of more specific words? Have you picked up any new words when doing your preliminary searching that you could use as a better alternative? Can you combine keywords to produce more specific and relevant results?

Try using different Boolean operators

**OR**
Try phrase searching, usually expressed in quotation marks.

Boolean operators allow you to combine your keywords in different ways in order to achieve the best set of results. The most common operators are **AND, OR, NOT**. AND and NOT are helpful in restricting the number of results you get.

Linking words with the **AND** operator tells the system that all of the words must appear in the record, although not necessarily together as in a phrase search. For example, linking the phrase **“student debt” AND UK** means that your retrieved record(s) must contain all these words. Using a combination of phrase searching and single word searching together yields more specific results than the search **Student AND Debt AND UK**.

Phrase searching is particularly appropriate when searching the Internet.

Linking words with the **NOT** operator excludes certain records. You may be looking for a book on **“student loans”** but you don't want anything that covers the U.S. Be careful though, you may exclude a really good book on student loans because it also covers student loans in the United States.
Too few results?

The reverse side of the problem. Maybe you are being too specific and have to broaden out a bit. Revisit your mind tool exercise and see if there are any alternative words you can use.

If this doesn't work try another source.

Maybe you are doing research on animal testing. You put those keywords into the appropriate database but find nothing, so you have to broaden your search. Think of new keywords. What does animal testing form a part of?

- Ethics
- Laboratory experiments
- Animal rights

Your new search might be for

**animals AND ethics**

Or

**“Animal rights”** (a phrase search).

Remember “Boolean operators”? The operator OR might be used to broaden your results e.g. Linking words with the OR operator means that you do not mind whether you retrieve a book on say “**Higher education**” OR “**Universities**”, either would be relevant to you. In practice you would then combine these words with AND to refine your search to student loans. Your search could look like this:

**(“Higher education” OR Universities) AND “student loans”**.

The brackets tell the database to perform the OR search first and combine the results with the phrase search **“student loans”**.

Not all databases support parentheses (brackets), sometimes you just need to use advanced search options and fill out the boxes linked together with the appropriate Boolean operator.

**Tip**: Always take a look at any “Help” screens available to you when using electronic databases. Most databases rely on you typing in keywords to retrieve a set of results but they will not all operate in the same way. The way that you express Boolean operators will vary from one database to another.
For example, some may need you to connect your words with the Boolean operator AND, others will assume the space between the words is the AND operator, yet others may assume this to be a phrase search.

Also remember that the records you retrieve are driven by your keywords, so you may miss a record if you use the keyword UK and the record contains United Kingdom instead or even Britain or England. It’s all about thinking up every keyword you can that might prove useful.

Check out the following link for further information on using Boolean operators to change your search results http://rockwellschrock.com/rbs3k/boolean/index.htm.