

I. Define a topic in Biological Sciences

Assume that you are interested in writing a paper on the Ecology of the Rain Forest. You may want to define the scope of your paper by defining what constitutes the rain forest and/or ecology.

1. Search for Ideas

If you are unfamiliar with the terms rain forest or ecology, search and read articles on the topic. A good place to start is to consult an encyclopedia or dictionary to help define your terms. These sources will give you a general background on your subject. If you need further help in developing your topic, talk to your reference librarians in the Reference Dept. or use the Ask A Librarian service. This service allows you to email or chat online with a reference librarian. If you are having trouble getting started, you may want to consult your instructor.

2. Narrow or Broaden your topic

Students often pick a topic that is too narrow or too broad. When you begin to look for information, one way to find out if your topic is too broad/too narrow is to notice the number of articles/books you find. For example, a search of the terms ecology and rainforest in the Academic Search Premier database (found under Ebscohost), brings up 163 articles. You can limit your search by year, full-text only, or peer reviewed articles. You can also add another term. For example, when you search for rainforest, ecology and trees, your search will narrow to only 24 articles.

Conversely, you have a search that only gives you a few articles. In that case, you need to broaden your topic. For example, if you search the terms rainforest, ecology and animals on Ebscohost, you retrieve only 14 articles. If you enter the terms rainforest and animals you retrieve 72 articles.

If you are still having trouble finding articles in your topic, look through several citations you previously retrieved. If you see a citation that looks promising, click on the title. This will bring up the full citation, and in many cases the full text of the article. Look at the subject headings assigned to the article. Make a note of these and then search again, using these terms. This may enable you to find articles relevant to your topic.

3. State your Topic as a Question

Stating your topic as a question may help you to stay within the scope of your selected topic. For example, how does man's treatment of the rainforest affect animal life?

4. Identify the Type of Information Needed

The type of information needed depends on the following:

- * Type of Assignment—is this a presentation, term paper, senior project, thesis or dissertation?
- * Amount of Information—how much information is needed for this assignment?
- * Currency of Information—does this assignment require current, historical or a combination
- * Type of Resources Needed—should the information come from only from scholarly and professional journals?
- * Information in Various Formats—should the information come from only print resources or should it include other formats such as visual/graphic sources, numeric sources (statistics), audio sources and/or electronic sources?