### Analyze Your Research Plan

This reading goes with the following assignment, "The Research Plan." It is important not only for this week's assignment but also for preparing for your final Pathfinder Project.

#### **Before you delve deeply into research...**

Documenting what you know and what you intend to learn about your topic can help you stay organized and focused in the long run. Creating a **Research Plan*,*** the assignment for this week, will help prepare you for researching your topic in all the different sources we'll be using in this course. Keep in mind that the research plan is a live document that will change and evolve as you learn more and as you make choices about the direction you want to take.

Refer to the following guidelines as you create your own research plan.

#### **IDENTIFY YOUR TOPIC WITH A CAREFULLY WORDED TITLE FOR YOUR PATHFINDER**

Choosing an appropriate topic is the first important step. You have already begun this process in Week Two but now you have had time to reflect on your choice and you may have a new idea about how you will express it. Check the work you did in [Week Two](http://angel.whatcom.ctc.edu/Permalink/Permalink.aspx?permalinkId=059c8114-d607-4720-b43a-903da48e653f&permalinkType=0). Make sure you have:

* Met all requirements of choosing a topic -- for this class, your topic must be something that has global significance and is narrowly defined
* Chosen something that you find interesting so that your process of discovery will be fun and interesting

**DESCRIBE YOUR TOPIC IN A STATEMENT OR QUESTION.**

In this step, you show the reader exactly what decisions you have made for how you define your topic. Your topic will be defined in a statement or question. If you were writing a research paper this part would be called your **thesis**.

If your topic is El Nino, your statement might be:

*El Nino has significantly affected weather, international relations, economies, and ecosystems worldwide*.

Rephrase your topic as a question that your research will answer:

*How has El Nino affected weather, international relations, economies, and ecosystems worldwide?*

**ANALYZE YOUR TOPIC**

You may already know more than you realize about your topic. This knowledge can help you think creatively about where and how to find the best information. Brainstorming is a technique that can help you generate descriptive terms. Use brainstorming to get started thinking about it. Here's how:

First write your phrase or question on a piece of paper.

Working with what you already know, try to list possible answers to the Who? - What?- Where? - When? - Why? - How? of your topic.

Your answers to these five questions are sources of SEARCHABLE TERMS, words that can help you search for information in print and in online sources.

###### **REVIEW THE KEY TERMS (an on-going process)**

* Look over your brainstorm above and make a list of useful key terms. You will add to this list as you learn more about your topic.
* Share your ideas. Your classmates can be an excellent source of ideas for key terms.
* Add new terms to your list each time you find one during your research.
* Continue to evaluate and add or drop from your list of terms as you research your topic.

#### **REFLECT ON THE CONTEXT OF YOUR TOPIC**

Considering the following questions can help you decide where to focus most of your research effort--at least to get started.

* Who would do research on your topic? What kinds of organizations or professionals are most likely to produce the best information?
* What academic disciplines (broad subject areas) are associated with your topic?
* How is information produced, researched, and published in these disciplines?
* What kinds of information do you need to answer your questions?

In most academic libraries circulating books and reference books (and sometimes audiovisual materials and periodicals) are organized according to Library of Congress Classification. This system divides human knowledge according to subject, reflecting academic disciplines. It uses letters and numbers to develop classes and subclasses and allows books on a topic to reside side-by-side for browsing. Interdisciplinary topics are classified according to what they are "most" about--the strongest subject. Library catalogs allow you to search by multiple key terms or subjects. Cross references lead to different treatments of a topic. At this point, concentrate on becoming aware of broad subject categories.

You will find that your preliminary search in encyclopedias will help you gain a general overview of your topic. General encyclopedias provide background discussion, while subject specific encyclopedias provide more detail, some depth, and reference to other sources.

#### **DEFINE THE SCOPE OF YOUR TOPIC**

Scope refers to what your topic will include. The scope of your topic should be narrow enough to define what you're looking for and broad enough to make it possible to find multiple sources of relevant information. Your research question serves as a guide, defining which information is relevant to your topic. It may be difficult to find enough information about a topic that is too narrowly focused...and an overly broad topic could make it seem as if everything is relevant and useful.

##### Consider this example:

Broad: *Weather patterns have worldwide effect.*

More focused: *El Nino has significantly affected weather, international relations, economies, and ecosystems worldwide*.

Further narrowed: *During El Nino years, people who live in agricultural economies suffer.*

##### Strategies for finding the right scope:

* Review the terms on your brainstorming exercise above.
* Look for keys to related narrower or broader topics.
* Ask your instructor or any librarian for ideas.

Adjust your topic as you discover new information.