

General advice for using library print sources in **3 EASY STEPS**.

Think of yourself moving from very general to more specific information about your topic. Sometimes this approach is called *successive fractions*, and it is a good approach for people with little background in their topic.

Be prepared to take notes for the writing phase. Think of the following titles as examples that are generally useful. Your search may involve different sources.

1. Get the big picture. Start with **GENERAL REFERENCE** sources, especially encyclopedias.

Examples:

[The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia](#)

[The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia](#)

[The Mennonite Encyclopedia](#)

[The Catholic Encyclopedia](#).

[World Book](#)

[Britannica](#)

While you read the general articles in these sources, look up important cross references in the articles. Keep a dictionary of church history and a Bible or theological dictionary open to look up unfamiliar terms and references. Examples:

[The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church](#)

[Eerdmans' Bible Dictionary](#)

[Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy](#)

Do you need an atlas or map? We have specialized atlases--Baker, MacMillan, Oxford.

BE PREPARED TO ABANDON OR MODIFY YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION AT THIS POINT. You know more now.

2. Get a narrower picture. Use the online catalog to zero in on a few **CIRCULATING** books. Also by using online services, the Christian Periodical Index or bibliographies from your first-step, find quality journal or electronic resources. Spend time on the electronic catalog search by examining the subject fields and clicking the subject links. Be sure to use the *look left* and *look right* commands on the online catalog toolbar to see what is on the shelf nearby. You can create a book list for yourself in the online catalog--use the My List tab.

Choose your materials.

Books

Do you need to read the whole book?

Search for your topic in the *table of contents* at the beginning of the book, then in the *index* at the back of the book. It might be better to read single chapters from 3 books, rather than read a single book. Ask your instructor if you can't make the choice.

Magazines & journals.

Generally speaking magazine articles are not adequate resources for college-level research papers, but it depends on the magazine. Feature stories in quality magazines can be used effectively.

What is a journal? A journal is usually published less frequently than a popular magazine (4x a year is typical). Academic researchers/specialists are the authors. Articles are peer-reviewed--other qualified specialists help review the article before it is printed, and other specialists are expected to read and comment after it is published. Journal articles usually have citations--references to other articles. Basic jargon and concepts from the field are not explained. Page numbering is usually successive through the year or volume. Journals are cited differently in research papers.

3. Specialize. Read your journal articles, paying special attention to the section that reviews other literature on the same topic--a literature review is almost always included in a journal article. Go back to **REFERENCE** and find **specialized** reference sources: Hebrew and Greek theological dictionaries, specialized works, etc. Here you are looking for narrowly focused works, or sections within a work that point specifically to your topic. These may be very similar to the references you started with, but your approach will be different. Now you are digging for very specific, detailed knowledge.

Examples:

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (Hastings)
The Oxford Classical Dictionary
Civilizations of the Ancient Near East (Sasson)
various Bible commentary sets in **REFERENCE**

The research advice above assumes you are researching a topic in religion, but the advice will cover you in all your classes at RBC.

Remember you are using successive fractions--starting with a big picture and then narrowing your focus:

1. Most likely you will start in reference to get a big picture, a context.
2. Move to the circulating collection and journals to narrow your topic.
3. Go back to reference to research for specifics and narrow your topic even more.