How to Develop a Search Strategy for Electronic Databases

Step 1

Decide on a topic you want to research (generally, you would want to come up with a researchable question you want to answer).

Example topic: Gun control legislation in the United States
Question: Should the federal government pass and enforce new gun control legislation? (As stated, this is broad, but it makes a good starting point)

Step 2

Select keywords from your topic, and then determine synonyms and related terms for your keywords.

	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword	Keyword	NOT
Keywords from Topic	Guns	Gun Control	Legislation	Federal Government	(any words or phrases you want to eliminate from your search)
Synonyms / Related Terms	Firearms	Firearms Control	Laws	United States	
			Regulations		

Step 3

Do some initial searches in one of the library's online databases using different combinations of your keywords and their synonyms.

Some potential search strings:

1) gun control and legislation and United States
2) (guns or firearms) and (legislation or laws) and United States

You may want to try these searches in the OPAC, Bevill State Community College Library's online catalog, to find books on this topic.

If you need to find periodical articles, you will want to search one of the Alabama Virtual Library's online periodical databases, such as Academic Search Premier or Expanded Academic ASAP (general academic databases).

Step 4

Select subject headings from on-target records you find in the database.

Sample Library of Congress Subject Headings found doing the above searches in Webster, Bevill State Community College Library's online catalog, that are useful to this search:

- Gun control United States
- Firearms ownership United States
- Firearms Law and legislation United States.

Step 5

Now do a more focused search using subject headings (this may or may not be necessary, depending on how much you find with a keyword search).

Step 6

Refine your search and topic as necessary using the new terminology and new information you've found. Continue your search in other databases.

For example, at this point, after having completed a little research, you may develop a more focused question, such as, "What has been the impact of the Brady Bill on police officers?" You would then continue your searches as above, incorporating this new topic into your search strategy.