



Figure 1 “Systems Thinking about the Society” by Marcel Douwe Dekker. Unaltered © [CC BY 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)

# Taking on Complex Research Problems

Most research problems are complex. Whether you need to know how a recent change in the law will impact your business or how global warming will impact the growing regions for staple crops, you will most likely be performing multiple searches to understand the issue, define its context, and propose a solution. Consider an assignment to determine **a new approach to curtailing alcohol abuse on college campuses**. Such a research task would require you to research several different kinds of information and synthesize them into one document.

## Research subtopics might include:

- Examples of problems caused by alcohol abuse among college students,
- Models of treatment that are already in existence
- How those treatments have or have not worked.
- How a new model could improve on the old.

Each subtopic requires that you read the available research and make a claim based on what you learn.

1) Search:

**Compose individual search strategies** for each subtopic. For instance, the search strategy for the first part of your essay may look like this:

College students or university students  
And  
Alcoholism or alcohol abuse or binge drinking  
And  
Problems or effects or outcomes or repercussions

2) Read:

**Evaluate** the articles for objectivity, timeliness, and authority; **compare and contrast** the information in the articles to look for trends or outliers; **note** useful or striking examples; and **think about** the claims each article makes and the evidence it uses for support.

3) Write:

**Synthesize** the information and **organize** it compellingly **to create claims** for each subtopic. Make sure you show how the research led you to your understandings.

4) Repeat:

**Search, read, and write for each subtopic.**

Keep in mind that you are not writing several mini-essays, but one large, cohesive whole. It is up to you to show how each subtopic relates to the others, and in turn, how all of your claims work together to make the broader point of the research paper.