

The Paper Chase ... Using the Library for Research

Think finding, not searching. A researcher can work more efficiently and avoid frustration by following a basic search strategy, which involves;

1. Selecting a paper topic
2. Finding background information
3. Narrowing and refining the topic
4. Locating information in books and periodicals
5. Locating information from other sources



You may not need to follow all five steps, but your search should be organized enough to let you get the information you need in a way that makes the best use of your time.

SELECTING A TOPIC

- Choose a topic that you can cover within the time and length limits set by your assignment and about which you can find enough information.
- Don't pick a topic that is so obscure that you cannot find sources or so broad that you cannot stick to length limits.
- Find a topic that interests you; this keeps you focused on the research process.

FINDING BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- Most subjects have special reference works, such as encyclopedias and dictionaries, which will help you understand your subject.
- A preliminary investigation of your subject is worth the time if you are researching an unfamiliar subject.
- Preliminary reading also helps you narrow your topic.

NARROW YOUR TOPIC AND FORMULATE A THESIS

- Think about ways to refine your topic so you know how you will approach your research and what you will say in your paper.
- Consider all sides of the topic and the questions that can be asked about it.
- Think about controversies relevant to your subject.
- Write on a specific aspect of the subject. The more specific the topic, the more organized your research will be.
- Narrow broad topics before you begin research;

Broad

American government
Autism
Domestic violence

Narrow

Federal aid to corporations
Diagnosis of the condition
Safety in shelters for abused women

- Find ways to limit your search
 - Time—politics after the Obama election
 - Place—organized crime in New Jersey
 - Discipline—psychological effects of substance abuse
 - Events—shootings in school, not juvenile crime
 - People—The White Stripes, not music
 - Special issues—smoking and birth weight, not obstetrics
- Once you select a topic, you can develop a thesis (topic statement). The thesis is a one or two sentence summary of the main point of your paper, and serves as its introduction. Research provides the material needed to present, discuss and defend your thesis.

LOCATE INFORMATION

You may need information from several types of sources. Start research early; books on popular topics are checked out early. You may need to get books through interlibrary loan.

Books are usually the place to start;

- They cover a subject in depth, discussing several sides of an issue.
- Use the online catalog to find books.
- Use a broader or narrower term if you find too much or too little information, such as the Battle of Gettysburg rather than the Civil War.
- Use similar words if you are unsuccessful finding information, such as ‘animal rights’ or ‘animal experimentation’ instead of ‘animal testing.’
- Use the catalog’s ‘browse option’ to see how broad subjects are divided into smaller topics.

Periodicals (newspapers and magazines) contain information that is more current than most books and will update your research, especially in areas where

knowledge changes rapidly. Locate articles through print or online indexes.

- Use an index that fits your search. Literature Online is a great place to start a paper on Dickens. CINAHL (nursing database) is a poor choice for researching corporate mergers.
- Use the library's instructions and the databases' 'Help' screens to find ways to help you search.

Librarians always available to help. You can also make an appointment to work with a reference librarian for extended assistance.

OTHER SOURCES

The Internet is a popular source of information, particularly recent information. However, it is also a source of misleading information.

- See what commands are suggested for the search engine you use. Using these commands to join or eliminate search terms makes your search more accurate.
- You must evaluate information retrieved from the Internet. It may not be carefully edited, reviewed or written by professionals.
- You can rely on the information if it was placed on the Internet by an entity you can trust, such as a professional organization or university.

Other helpful sources;

- Librarians can suggest sources and help with search strategy.
- Other media, such as DVD's, can help.
- Statistical sources provide data to support your thesis.
- People can be sources; business, government and social agencies have contacts who will provide insight.

For help in writing and citing, try the following;

Amato, Carol J. The World's Easiest Guide to Using the APA. New York: Star-gazer Publications, 2002

Booth, Wayne C., et. al. The Craft of Research., 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 2003.

Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 6h ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 2003.

Mann, Thomas. Oxford Guide to Library Research. New York: Oxford U Press, 1998.

Markman, Rebecca. Ten Steps in Writing the Research Paper. New York: Bar ron's, 2001

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th ed. Washing- ton, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001.

Strunk, William and E.B. White. Elements of Style, 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1979.

Trimmer, Joseph. A Guide to MLA Documentation: With an Appendix to APA Style. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

Troyka, Lynn. QA: Quick Access Reference for Writers. New York: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007

Weidenborner, Stephen. Writing Research Papers: A Guide to the Process. New York: 2005.

Zinssner, William Knowlton. On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Non-Fiction. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Angela Camack 6/09