

Research Tips and Strategies

One characteristic of successful academic writing is the inclusion of thorough research. Including reliable sources to confirm or strengthen your own assertions on your topic of choice makes for a much more convincing argument. However, finding these reliable sources and then applying them may prove to be a challenge. The following guidelines may help you, the struggling researcher, to meet that challenge successfully and to move on to the next stage of the writing process.

Getting Started

Finding and Narrowing Your Topic



The first step in conducting good research is to first find and narrow or broaden the topic you wish to write about.

Some instructors will do this for you while others will merely give you an “umbrella” topic or general area of interest such as “Current Social Issues,” and it will be up to you to choose and possibly narrow the topic to a manageable size.

Narrow your topic into various search terms. For example, if you are writing a paper on violence in the media, consider searching more narrow topics, such as “violence in music,” “violent comic books,” or “violent movies,” in addition to searching the broader topic. Write your search terms down and check them off as you go through them but also look for other search terms within the research itself.

In some instances, you may need to ***broaden your search terms***. For example, if you are researching a small detail within a text rather than the text itself, you may find that your searches aren’t returning many useful results. Rather, in this instance, try a broad search of the subject and judge the relevance to your thesis based on the titles and abstracts of the results.



The second step in conducting good research is to decide what kind of information you are looking for and where you will be able to find it.

Depending upon your topic, decide what *type of information* would be the most useful to you. For example, would concrete facts and research studies better support your thesis, or would personal reflections and opinions be better suited for your particular assignment?

Now that you have chosen the type of research you wish to conduct, you must find out how to locate your sources. For example, if you are searching for research studies, then academic periodicals and libraries are likely to have that for which you are looking. If you are interested in current events, a reliable newspaper will be beneficial. To find facts or statistics, consult government documents or Web sites. If you are looking for history, consult books or newspaper archives.

These are just a few examples of where you can find research. Remember, the type of information you are looking for determines where you are going to find it.

Types of Research

Primary Research

When beginning research, you should take note of different types of research strategies. The easiest and most immediate research is called *primary research*. Primary research is research you collect yourself. This can include interviews, surveys, or case studies. Be aware that primary research is not to be confused with *primary sources*. A primary source is the original text about which you are writing or analyzing, most often used in literary research. Primary research, on the other hand, utilizes information that has been created or accessed by the researcher. Some common types of primary research are: interviews, surveys and questionnaires, and observations:



One way of conducting primary research is the **interview**. Simply asking someone, preferably an expert in the field of your chosen topic or another observer, is an excellent way of gaining information.



Another means of conducting primary research is by using a **survey or questionnaire**. Surveys contain a series of questions about a given topic and usually have pre-specified or short answer responses.



A third means of conducting primary research is by performing **observations**. This entails observing the environment around you and documenting your findings. This type of research is especially helpful in the science, education, and social work fields as students are required to complete field work.

Secondary Research

A more complex type of research than primary research is called *secondary research*. Secondary research is simply the accessing of articles that have been previously published in another media source. Because of the enormous amount of this type of information available, and the ever-changing ways and means of accessing it, it might be beneficial to attend a research seminar or get in touch with one of Monmouth University's librarians for more in-depth assistance (<http://library.monmouth.edu>).



Generally, to do secondary research, it is helpful to use online databases such as Academic Search Premier, Ebscohost, and other scholarly databases, and do a "subject," "author" or "keyword" search. It is important to note that some articles have not been published online in their entirety, so it is necessary for you to make certain that a "full-text" article is being used.

Internet vs. Print Publications

Internet research includes all available electronic Internet sources, including individual web pages and other Internet sources. While this may be the most convenient place to begin your search, it is not always the most credible information. You, as a discriminating researcher, must become your own evaluator to determine which information you access is credible.



There may be other stumbling blocks to this type of research as well, including faulty and “bogus” information. It is important to note that the individual search engines do not have any evaluatory or qualitative regulations for any sites that they publish, and it is up to the student researcher to distinguish the legitimate information from the fraudulent.



For example, if you are doing an essay on euthanasia, you probably should not use personal lectures and sermons from religious groups, at least for objective evidence, as these groups may have subjective and ethic-based views of the value of life.



Note: Many print publications, such as newspaper and magazine articles, book chapters, and journals, are now available online. Be sure to distinguish if the online source is available in print form as well.

Types of Print Sources

- **Books and Textbooks**
There are books written on a multitude of topics; however, books may not always be the best choice as they contain more dated information than will be found in more current publications such as journals and newspapers.
- **Newspapers**
Newspapers have the most current information because they are published daily. Also, newspapers offer both objective (factual) and subjective (opinionated) views on issues.
- **Academic Journals**
Academic journals are where you would find the most up-to-date information related to a specific discipline or field. Journals are available both in print form and through academic databases.
- **Government and Legal Documents**
These types of documents, intended for public use, can be an excellent source of information if you are searching for facts or statistics. Many are available online through government Web sites.

Writing and Documenting

Once you have finished researching your topic, make sure to carefully read the articles and other pieces of information you found. If you already have a focused topic, you can more easily determine which research can best support your evidence. If you have a general issue in mind but would like to narrow your topic further, return to your research to help you with your focus and position. Your research should help you develop a thesis statement or central idea for your paper. Do not forget to record bibliographic and citation information for future referencing both for in-text citations and for your Works Cited page. At this point, you are close to being finished with the prewriting portion of your essay. If you should need any further assistance with the writing process, the Writing Center is always here to help!