

General Research Tips and Techniques

by: Lady Beatrice de Winter

What is Research?

First, we must define exactly what research is.

“Research is the investigation of a particular topic using a variety of reliable, scholarly resources. The three major goals of research are establishing facts, analyzing information, and reaching new conclusions. The three main acts of doing research are searching for, reviewing, and evaluating information. Learning what research is not may help you fully grasp the concept. Randomly selecting books from the library is not research, nor is surfing the Internet. On the contrary, research requires organization, resourcefulness, reflection, synthesis, and above all, time.”

<http://www.edison.edu/library/researchskills/Unit1/1whatIsResearch.php>

Getting Started / Selecting a Topic

“The research process has a beginning and an end, with many stages or steps in between.”

<http://www.edison.edu/library/researchskills/Unit1/2ResearchProcess.php>

- Remain objective!! Rather than succumb to personal biases or assumptions at the beginning of your project, let your research findings guide your conclusions.
- Consider WHY you are researching – are you going to: Write a paper? Teach a class? Write an article? Having a clear goal in mind will help focus your research.
- Brainstorming with other people is often a good way to select an overall area to research.
- Take care not to pick a topic that is too broad or too narrow in scope for your purposes. “Clothing in the 16th Century” may be far too broad for some purposes, while “16th Century Wool Flatcaps” may be too narrow for others.
- Once you have a topic in mind, spend time reading general background information about the subject. Finding background information at the beginning of your research is especially important if you are unfamiliar with the subject area, or not sure from what angle to approach your topic.
- Once you have selected a topic to research, ask yourself what exactly you want to find out about that topic. Restating your topic as a question can be helpful here. More than one question will provide different research avenues to pursue.

Resources

Selecting solid resources is critical to any research project. No resource is inherently “bad”, but each and every resource must be critically examined and evaluated including but not limited to: books, articles, and web sites. Even Wikipedia is a fine resource as a place to begin. However, you MUST follow all notes/citations to determine whether the information is accurate.

- Areas to consider when evaluating resources in general:

- Authority – Who is the author? What are his/her credentials? Who is the publisher? Academic publishers are often indications of more scholarly material.
 - Audience – Is this resource more generalized or more specialized? Is it appropriate for your audience?
 - Accuracy – Does the author make supported or unsupported claims? Look for bibliographic information and follow the trail to confirm specific claims.
 - Objectivity – Is the information impartial or biased? Does it attempt to influence the opinion of the reader? If the viewpoint is significantly different from other authors on this topic, take special care to examine the data and supporting evidence.
 - Currency – What is the publication date? Does being up-to-date matter for your particular topic? Have there been revisions?
- Web sites are particularly tricky because anyone can make information available online. Be sure to thoroughly examine any sites you are considering using as a resource.

Citations

Every resource used must be cited, regardless of how much information is used.

“Whenever you get ideas or information for your paper from another work, you must credit—or cite—that work. Whether you are directly quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing information, or simply have reviewed a resource that contributed to the ideas in your paper, you must give all authors credit for informing your paper.” <http://www.edison.edu/library/researchskills/Unit10/1citing.php>

- There are many citation styles available including, but not limited to, APA, MLA, Chicago Style, and Turabian Style. Often the SCA relies on Chicago Style, but that is always subject to change. Be sure to follow all of the details for the appropriate style guide you are using.
- Reasons for citing: provide additional information to your reader, provide evidence for your claims, give other authors credit for their ideas, and of course to prevent plagiarism.

For More Information

There are many fantastic places to look for additional help with research. Below are just a few:

<http://library.buffalo.edu/help/research-tips/>

<http://www.edison.edu/library/researchskills/>

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/advice-for-students-10-steps-toward-better-research.html>