

How to Begin Your Research

As a librarian working in an area surrounded by educational institutions of all levels, I am often approached by students looking for help in beginning their research. It is surprising to note just how often the students have a very vague idea of what they need to write about. Sometimes the reason for this is a poor prompt (write 4-6 pages on "the royal colonies" or a 5-pager on "psychology") and at other times it is because the student has not been taught - or didn't understand the lesson on - basic skills like narrowing a topic, selecting sources, and formulating a thesis. It is to the latter student that this article is addressed.

Narrowing a Topic

The first thing you need to do when you have to write a paper is to decide what you're writing about. It's easier when you get a prompt or question from your teacher - but even then it is rare that you can cover everything about your topic in just a few pages and a quickly approaching deadline. Scholars conduct years of research in order to write their books, but you don't have to. In order to use your time wisely, you must narrow down your topic. That way, you have a direction for your thinking which leads to good questions. When you come to the library and ask me good questions, I'll give you excellent answers (actually, I'll try to give even poorly thought-out questions good answers, but I *like* answering good ones more).

So, where do you start? First of all, you have to know something about your topic. I don't know how many times I've asked students for details about their subject and they shrug. I'm not sure how they're planning to write five pages on something they know nothing about. Don't be *that* person. Before you do anything else, grab an encyclopedia or log on to Wikipedia and do a quick search. The purpose of this first step is to get a general idea of your topic. A brief high-level overview that an encyclopedia offers is useful to skim initially so you don't waste time wading through details you don't need later.

Now that you've got a general idea of what your topic entails, you can start to get more focused. Since you obviously can't write about, for example, the whole Civil War in a few pages, it is necessary to specify how you will approach the subject. An easy way to do that is to pick two of the following:

- Time Period (i.e. 1920-1925, 1975 to present, 6:30am-5:00pm)
- Key Person or Group (i.e. Napoleon, the artists of Die Brücke movement, yo mama)
- Place (i.e. North America, Los Angeles, Olvera Street)
- An Intellectual, Political, or Otherwise Conceptual Movement (i.e. Republicans, Rationalists, Masons)
- Aspect (i.e. economic, social, cultural, culinary)

The American Civil War being your topic, you might narrow to the economy in the south during the War (aspect, place) or Robert E. Lee's strategy after 1864 (key person, time period). Doing this will make it easier to wrap your mind around a big topic thus making your project that much more manageable.

Selecting Sources

Okay, so you've narrowed your topic. The next thing that you have to do is to find credible sources to tell you about that topic. Searching any popular topic online or even in the library will yield literally thousands of sites, so how do you choose?

Start by thinking about the person who wrote the source. Is this person an expert on the topic? It's hard to know for sure, but three major ways to tell is by looking at the person's schooling (Does he have a Ph.D. in the topic?), affiliations (Is she a professor of your topic at a big university, a member of an association related to the topic, or an employee (or head) of a company that works on the topic?), and literary output (has he written a bunch of other articles or books on the topic?). Obviously, if you're writing a paper on the Spanish Armada and the author of your source has an advanced degree (Masters' or Ph.D) in Spanish History, is a professor at Harvard, and has written six books on the Spanish navy, you've found a good source.

The other big question to ask when selecting sources is the source's location. When looking at websites, it is generally best to trust websites with the .edu, .gov, .org, .net and .com domains in that order. Websites without advertisements are generally better than those with ads. And as when evaluating the source's author, websites that are affiliated with trusted institutions are typically of higher quality than those that are not. Those sites are not always within the first ten sites on Google so don't be afraid to dive into pages two, three, four, or even five in your search.

As a person who does many searches on a variety of topics every day, I still believe that books generally provide deeper coverage of topics than the internet. That said, the gulf between digital and print sources is closing so books and encyclopedia articles (in addition to Wikipedia) can now be found in full online, you just have to know where to look. I recommend going straight to your library's website, getting into the applicable database and searching. There are databases for literally every topic and the articles stored in them are mostly not to be found in Google, and yet their quality is generally much higher. With a little practice, most database searches for popular topics shouldn't take longer than five or ten minutes. But this is time well spent since you'll have sources that your teacher will love and, more importantly, that you'll find useful.

Don't procrastinate! Finding sources is the most time-consuming part of the writing process other than examining your sources and of course, the writing itself. Give yourself time to find enough sources to meet your teacher's requirements *and* make you feel comfortable with your topic. When I was a student I typically went home with two or three stacks of books and articles and read them closely later. That's because once I got home, I never wanted to schlep back to the library for more digging. So before you leave the library, plop down at a table and do some skimming. If the stuff you've gathered looks good, go home. If not, ask the librarian for help. We'll often know a few sources that you may not have considered. It's much better to leave the library with too many sources than too few.

Formulating a Thesis

After you've narrowed your topic, found and perused your sources, it is time to decide what you think. The statement that sums up your opinion in a sentence or two is your thesis. I'm not going to go in-depth about how a thesis should be structured (there are plenty of other articles and teachers to do that), but I will give some advice on how to create a strong one.

First of all, have no fear. You've read a bunch of stuff on your topic so you should know something about it. If your topic is great basketball players, you would narrow your topic like we talked about before: offensive players (aspect) from 2005-present (time period). Then you'd browse sources like NBA statistics, sports columns from newspapers, and books about top scorers etc. Finally, you'd be ready to state your opinion. The key here is to pretend like you're in a room full of other basketball fans and you know your stuff better than they do. You'd shout "Kobe Bryant is the best basketball player of our time!" There we go. A thesis. Naturally, your paper would go on to explain why Kobe is the man.

Second of all, don't worry too much about being truly original. If you're in elementary, middle, high school or early college no one expects you to make any scholarly discoveries. The point of your papers is to display an understanding of the topic. Oftentimes prompts will have you choose between two options, for example "In your paper explain whether you feel that George Washington or Thomas Jefferson was a more effective as president." Here, your task is to do your research (which you would begin as described in the previous two sections), and decide based on that research which man was the better president. Your thesis, in a situation like this would look like this: "Because blah-blah-blah, it is clear that so-and-so was more effective as president." (where blah-blah-blah equals the reasoning behind your decision). The scariest thing in this situation is that you must state *your* opinion, but again, have no fear because the opinion is something you form by reading the facts and opinions of others -- it does not have to appear out of thin air.

Third, don't get stuck. It's true that coming up with a thesis can be tough, but really, it's just a matter of making a

decision. Every book, article, documentary (pretty much everyone of your sources) started with a thesis. Students have been writing them since education began. There's no reason why you should be the one person in the world who cannot come up with a thesis. If you're truly struggling, you can do one of two things: 1) Take a short break. Refreshing your mind by taking it out to the park or even just to the kitchen can be just what is needed to jolt it into thesis-making mode. 2) Reread or just skim a source or three. This sounds absolutely unappetizing, especially after you've already been doing the research, but there is no substitute for it. If you're stuck on your thesis, and you're not just being shy or trying to come up with something truly original, you do not know enough about your topic. Learning more, or learning what you know better will give you what you need to state the opinion on which your paper will be based.

The End

The best advice I can give about research is to, whenever possible, choose a topic that is (or can be) interesting to you. There's nothing easier or more fun than learning more about a topic you already love. The second best advice I can give is to begin. Just start. What seems difficult or impossible at the outset is not always so hard when you're actually doing it. So get to it. Good luck!

Oleg Kagan is a librarian and writer. For more information visit his website at <http://lifeinoleg.com>. Feel free to email questions or comments to Oleg at lifeinoleg@gmail.com.