

## Chapter 2

# Developing a Library Research Strategy

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**Library research** begins when you need information, for your own satisfaction or to fulfill an academic assignment. This may involve locating one specific fact or writing a 20-page research paper. The process of solving each research problem is similar, although the depth of the research and the time it takes will depend upon the assignment.

A library research strategy is a plan of action that gives direction to your research, enabling you to conduct research systematically rather than haphazardly. It can help you stay on track, save time, reduce frustration, and enhance the quality of your research.

While carrying out your research strategy you will need to exercise critical thinking throughout the process. For each new information resource that you discover, consider the quality of the information and its appropriateness to your topic. You should remain constantly aware of the quantity of material you are gathering as well, asking yourself, "Is it too much or not enough?" Conducting research is not easy. It can cause anxiety and frustration. So, before you start sticking pins in that voodoo doll made to look like your professor, remember that you're not alone and that you can always ask for help at the Reference Desk.

There are numerous correct ways to conduct research. The strategy presented in this chapter is one possible model that works well with any academic assignment. It is a suggested strategy that can be modified for individual needs.

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## Steps in the Library Research Process



### Define Your Topic

After you have chosen your general topic, you need to define it further. Be sure you understand the assignment before you begin. Write down what you think you need to do and then discuss it with your instructor to confirm that you are on target. For vague or undefined assignments, brainstorming either in a group or individually may be a first step in exploring your possibilities. Although the reference librarians are happy to help you find sources or to suggest new directions for your search, they cannot interpret your assignment for you. So before you come to Ramsey Library, be certain that you understand what your instructor expects.

You may need to **narrow** a topic that is too general. A topic that is too general may lead you to more information than you can handle. For example, a paper on the entire American Revolution would be overwhelming, but a study of political developments in the colonies or colonial military strategies would be manageable.

On the other hand, if you find only a few or no sources dealing with a specific topic, you may need to **broaden** it, that is put your topic in its broader context. For example, you may not find any books entirely on the Battle of Marathon, but you would find information about that battle in numerous books on the history of ancient Greece.

One exercise you can use to define and develop your topic is to make a word list of terms related to it, including broader terms that expand your

topic, narrower terms that identify specific aspects of it, and related terms that you may not need but are available if you need to change your approach.

Your word list might look something like this:

My Topic: <b>Hippies of the 1960s</b>	
Broader Terms:  <b>Bohemianism</b> <b>Counter Culture</b> <b>Radicalism</b> <b>Social History--1960-1970</b> <b>Subculture</b>	Narrower Concepts:  <b>Drug use among</b> <b>Politics of</b> <b>Non-violence of</b> <b>Communal living</b> <b>among</b>
Related Terms:  <b>Anti-war movement</b> <b>Peace movement</b> <b>Free love; Flower power</b> <b>Flower child; Pacifism</b>	

List the terms you find under each category. Make your word list flexible, so that it can change, expand, or shrink as needed. Use it along the way as you develop your research questions.

### **Seek a Focus**

Throughout the early stages of your research, your topic should continue to develop. Seek a focus, a specific aspect or central concept of the subject that you want to address. For example, aromatherapy might be the focus in a paper on alternative medicine. The focus may be one aspect of the general topic, one of the narrower terms on your word list, or an idea you gleaned from an article in a subject encyclopedia or other source material.



Finding a specific focus for your research often marks the turning point in a library research project. At this point, your role changes from that of an observer to that of a participant or contributor to the knowledge in that field. When you do settle on a focus, alter your word list to reflect

the direction you have selected and the terminology that will be important as you continue your research.

## Get Some Background Information

As you begin research on your topic, you should make sure you are well acquainted with the basic terminology of the discipline and that you have a certain familiarity with the concepts and ideas in the field. Having this background will help you feel more comfortable with your chosen topic and will place it in a wider context. Remember, as you investigate the background of your topic, add to your word list the subject headings, major concepts, keywords, and significant phrases that you find.

**Encyclopedias** are a great place to get an overview of a topic that is new to you. Encyclopedias will often identify narrower areas within the broader subject, which may suggest a focus for your research. Many encyclopedias will also provide bibliographies that can help you locate further sources of information.

When you think of encyclopedias, you may think only of general encyclopedias like *World Book* or *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. There are also many excellent **subject encyclopedias**, such as *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology* or *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, which can be very helpful in the early stages of your research.



Remember, encyclopedias are good **starting points**, but you should not think that when you have consulted an encyclopedia you have all the information you need on a subject, particularly for college-level research.

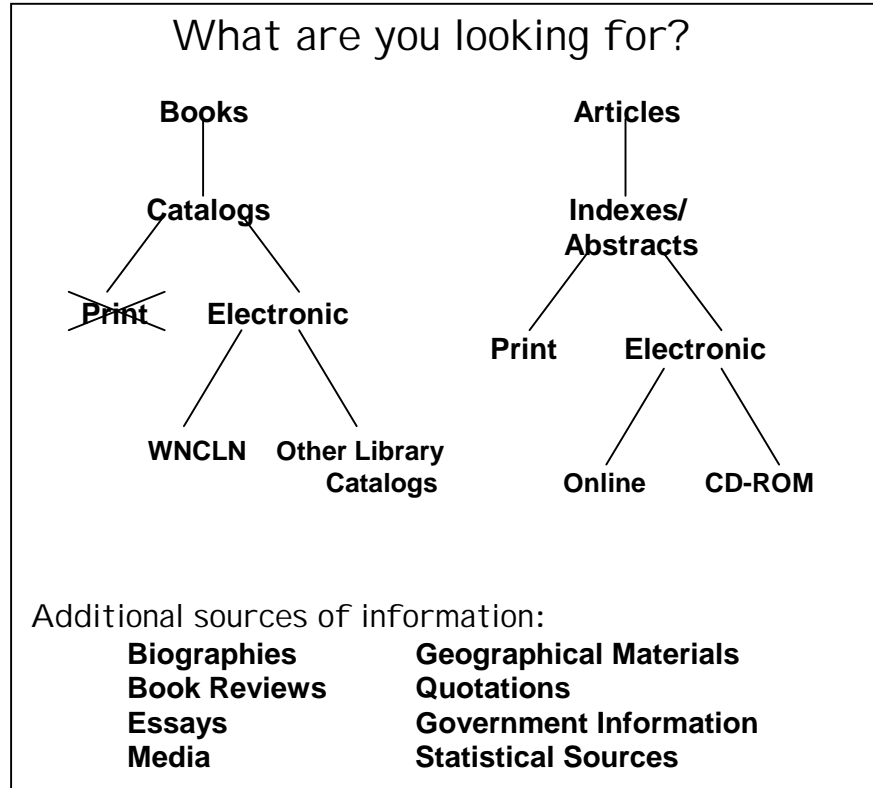
Work from general to specific. If a general encyclopedia does not give you enough background information, continue your research with a subject encyclopedia. As you consult subject encyclopedias, browse through the books near them on the shelves. You may discover other reference sources that will also be useful.

**Dictionaries** can be helpful in defining the unfamiliar terms and specialized terminology you may encounter as you begin researching a new subject.

Just as in the case of encyclopedias, there are general dictionaries that cover the entire world of words and subject dictionaries that define terms in specific subject areas. For example, subject dictionaries in the social sciences include *Dictionary of Sociology*, *The Social Work Dictionary*, *A Feminist Dictionary*, and *Dictionary of Gerontology*. There are also specialized dictionaries that deal with certain aspects of language like abbreviations, slang, and word origins.

## Start Gathering Sources

The two major sources of information in the library are **books** and **periodical articles**. Your instructor will probably expect you to draw from one or both of these and to enhance your findings with other more specialized sources.



**Books** tend to record the established scholarship on a topic. They often provide footnotes and bibliographies that identify additional material on the subject. However, books take time to write and to publish, so they usually do not contain the most up-to-the-minute information.

**Articles** in magazines, journals, or newspapers are a good source for highly current news, views, and scholarship. Articles found in scholarly journals often include footnotes and bibliographies as well which can lead you to other helpful sources.

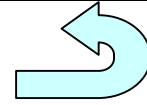
**Additional sources** of information are available to complement what you will find in books and periodical articles. Among these are biographical sources, book reviews, statistics, geographical sources, essays, quotations, government publications, and video documentaries. Statistical, geographical, and other factual materials substantiate the points you develop to really "make your case."

**Selectively browse** by going to the call number assigned to your topic. Because the Library of Congress classification system places

material by subject, scanning the shelves in the area you have identified can be a very useful way to find information.

**Evaluate your source material** at every point during your research. Make sure that it adequately addresses your topic.

### Redirect Your Successful Searches



As you are doing your research, don't forget to make note of and use any useful **footnotes**, **bibliographies**, **subject headings**, and **keywords** you find along the way to lead you to other sources. A book or an article with extensive footnotes or a lengthy bibliography will suggest additional sources; the subject headings and keywords of one helpful item may also identify others.

In addition, look for other works written by the same **author**. Scholars tend to become experts in a field and continue working and publishing on that topic.

Finally, as you gather your information, look at the shelves nearby. **Selective browsing** often reveals material that you may have missed in your systematic searches.

Keep your eyes and your mind open as you investigate. Let your findings direct you to more information.

### Get it Down

When you find information that is useful to you, print it, photocopy it, make note cards, or follow whatever procedure your instructor recommends. Make sure that you have recorded the **source** of the information, the **date**, and the **publication data**. You will need to know this when you prepare your bibliography (See Appendix D). Scholars who did not record this information in their notes have spent hours and even years hunting an obscure reference they wanted to cite in their work!

### Synthesize the Information

Synthesis begins as you start to integrate the information you have gathered into your own intellectual product. At this point, you are organizing, composing, and processing, a sometimes difficult but essential step. This is a time of concentration, application of logic, and creativity. Your own genius will come through as you weave the information you have found into the fabric of new knowledge.

### Evaluate Your Work

After the synthesis and presentation of your project are complete, evaluate your successes and your difficulties. Make note of procedures

to change or improve because, without a doubt, you will have another opportunity for library research in the future.

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## Concurrent Concerns

As you are following these steps of library research, stay focused on the matter at hand, use critical thinking to judge the quality, quantity, and appropriateness of the information you find, and stay cool. Don't stress yourself out. If you get bogged down in the information mire, ask a reference librarian to help tow you out.

### Stay on Topic

Ask yourself, "Have I developed a clear focus for my research? Does this focus connect logically with my topic and fulfill the requirements of the assignment? Does the information I am finding match my chosen focus?"

### Quality of Information

You should constantly judge the quality of the material you find using several standards. Consider whether the sources are objective, valid, logical, timely, and reliable.

**Objective material** is free from prejudice or bias. Is the author's point of view balanced and impartial? Is the information fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Propaganda, or the promotion of particular ideas, can often be detected because of the use of emotion-rousing words. Be careful. Skilled writers can often make you think their *interpretations* are "facts."

**Valid information** is well researched and supported by evidence. It may agree with the established scholarship or it may update or add new information to the field of study. The author's assumptions should be reasonable and free of errors and omissions. Footnotes and bibliographies should identify the work's place in the discipline.

**Logical organization** is an earmark of a high quality publication. Although the author may write in a complex and scholarly style, she must develop her arguments clearly, with her points presented in reasonable order.

**Timeliness** of the material is also important. Is it current for your topic? When was it published? If your topic concerns a field that is undergoing continual, rapid development, such as one of the sciences, you may need to collect more current information. On the other hand, material written many years ago on topics in the humanities may still be very important.

**Reliable material** represents knowledge based on competent research and can be evaluated by investigating the author. What are the author's credentials in this area? Is the book or article written on a topic in the author's area of expertise? Biographical sources, such as those indexed in *Biography and Genealogy Master Index* or the information located in the publication itself, can be used to determine the author's qualifications.

Have you heard this author mentioned elsewhere or seen the name cited in other sources or bibliographies? Respected authors are cited frequently by other scholars. Notice names that appear again and again in different sources and investigate them as part of your research.

To evaluate a book that you are considering using for your research use *Book Review Digest* or *Book Review Index* to locate critical book reviews. Then ask yourself, "Is the review positive?" "Is the book considered a valuable contribution to the field?" If the reviewer compares the book to others on the same topic, you can locate those sources to get more information or a fresh point of view.

Other questions to use when evaluating books include:

**Are there later editions of the same work?** Further editions usually indicate that a source has been revised and updated to reflect changes in knowledge. Also, many printings or editions can indicate that the work has become a standard source and is reliable.

**Is the publisher well known and reputable?** If the work is published by a university press, it is likely to be scholarly. The fact that the publisher is reputable does not necessarily guarantee a book's quality, but suggests that the work should be taken seriously and, like all sources, evaluated carefully.

**If the source is a periodical article, is it in a scholarly journal or a popular magazine?** Articles found in scholarly journals are likely to be written by experts who document their research with footnotes. Articles in popular magazines are usually written for a more general audience and lack footnotes.

## **Quantity of Information**

Keep the length of the final product in mind as you investigate your topic. The amount of material for a five-minute speech or a three-page paper is considerably less than for an hour-long seminar or a twelve-page paper. Ask yourself, "Have I gathered sufficient material to meet my requirements?" "Will I actually use all of the material or should I limit further the scope of my topic?"

## **Appropriateness of Information**

**Determine the intended audience** for your work and gather material written for that audience. For every source you need to ask, "Is it too elementary, too advanced, too technical, or just right for my needs?"

**Primary and secondary sources** distinguish between records of what happened and reports compiled after the fact. **Primary sources** include eyewitness accounts published in newspapers, data collected in the census, thoughts and feelings recorded in diaries and letters, and the documentation of interviews and oral histories. Published material by prominent people, such as *The Complete Works of Abraham Lincoln* or *The Speeches of Martin Luther King*, would also be considered primary material. Most published information, however, falls into the category of **secondary sources**, which offer commentary written with reference to other documentation. For gathering primary information you will need to use sources other than standard books and periodical articles.

## Research Stress



Research is as much an emotional endeavor as it is an intellectual one. It is normal to feel apprehensive at first as you face a research assignment and anxious when faced with the tremendous amount of information available in books, periodicals, online databases, and on the Web.

Delaying to select a topic and putting off that trip to the library can only add to research stress. In the research process you may identify a number of resources not held in Ramsey Library. Allow yourself enough time to get materials from ASU or WCU through ABC Express or from other libraries through Interlibrary Loan. Materials requested through ILL may take two weeks or more to obtain, so **don't procrastinate!** Decide on a research topic and get started!

Often, your research will revolve around a new and unfamiliar topic, and it may be necessary to educate yourself a bit. Going to a subject encyclopedia and developing a word list are excellent first courses of action. When the material becomes familiar and the work is clearer, identify the focus you wish to pursue.

When selecting the research focus, remember that you will be working intimately with the topic for an extended period of time. Choose a subject that not only fulfills the assignment but that will sustain your interest. There should be sufficient material on the topic you choose and ample time to sort through the resources available.

Conducting research is labor intensive and a good researcher is persistent. Follow your leads and leave no stone unturned. Call upon a librarian to help you identify resources that you may have overlooked.

In the final steps, when you use the information you have collected in combination with your thoughts in a paper or presentation, you are making your own contribution to scholarship. Who knows? Maybe the research you do today as an undergraduate may lead to bigger things -- a Master's thesis? an article or book of your own?

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## Chapter 2 Exercises

1. What is a library research strategy? \_\_\_\_\_  
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2. List one exercise you can use to define and develop your topic.  
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3. How can an encyclopedia be helpful to you when you are researching a topic with which you are unfamiliar? \_\_\_\_\_  
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4. What are the two major sources of information in the library?  
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5. What are some ways you can use one book or article to lead you to other books and articles on the same subject? \_\_\_\_\_  
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6. What are the main points to consider when evaluating the quality of information you find? \_\_\_\_\_  
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7. How do primary and secondary sources differ? \_\_\_\_\_  
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8. Other than to reduce your stress level, list one practical reason why you should not wait until the last minute to select a research topic and get started on library research.  
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## Answers Chapter 2

1. A library research strategy is a plan of action that gives direction to research, enabling you to conduct research systematically rather than haphazardly.
2. Compile a word list that includes broader, narrower, and related terms.
3. An encyclopedia can give you an overview of or an introduction to a topic that is new to you. Many encyclopedias also provide bibliographies which will help you locate additional sources of information.
4. books and periodical articles
5. Use the bibliography, footnotes, subject headings, keywords, look for more work by the same author, and selectively browse materials nearby on the shelf.
6. Consider whether the source is objective, valid, logically organized, timely, and reliable.
7. **Primary sources** are records of events, e.g., eyewitness accounts published in a newspaper, thoughts recorded in diaries and letters, documentation of interviews, or oral histories. **Secondary sources** are reports compiled after an event or commentary on a topic written with reference to other documentation.
8. In the research process, you may identify resources not held in Ramsey Library, which may take time to procure from other libraries. Materials requested through ILL may take two weeks or longer.