Lloyd Sealy Library

Introduction to General Research

This handout is designed to give you an overview of beginning the research process as well as some useful library resources and tips that you can use. In addition to books, databases and subject guides don't forget to make use of additional resources available from the library including your librarians who are available in person, on the phone, and by email!

What is Research?

Research is the **organized study** of a subject in order to discover facts, establish or revise a theory or to develop a plan of action based on the facts discovered. Research is at its most basic whenever you look something up. In an academic setting, research is when done in the papers that you write; history essays, scientific studies, literary analysis, or argument papers are all examples of places where you end up doing research.

When you pursue research on any topic, there are three questions that you need to ask yourself:
- What is already known about my topic or interest?
- What needs to be understood about my topic?
- What can I add to the study of this topic?

To do good research you need the following:
- To be able to find accurate and acceptable sources
- Decide what ideas in your research you agree or disagree with
- Compose a thesis which is "a position or proposition that a person advances and offers to maintain by argument" that will be the basis of your paper

Search Engines

The first instinct of most someone who is unfamiliar with conducting research in an academic environment is to turn primarily to Google and Wikipedia. That is a problematic way to begin your research for a variety of reasons including: Google searches tend to produce an avalanche of results with a lot of material being inappropriate for academic purposes, Wikipedia is both **not** accepted by professors as a valid source and can be both inaccurate and unreliable especially on controversial subjects. As a researcher you must consider if the information you are finding is reliable, valid, authoritative, relevant and current.

Evaluating Sources

Scholarly journals are publications that publish original research articles written by scholars and researchers. **Peer Reviewed articles** (also referred to as Scholarly) are materials that go through a process called "peer review" before being published. Scholars in the field evaluate the submitted manuscript material for originality, veracity & plausibility and recommend, or not, that the research be published. **Non-Scholarly articles** include news and entertainment stories usually written by journalists. The general characteristics of a scholarly journal article may include: starting with an **abstract** or summary, having a **bibliography** or list of references at the end, and **cite** articles/books in the text. The **tone** of the article will tend to be restrained and serious while the topic will be focused and explored in depth.

Primary versus Secondary Sources

Primary sources are materials that are produced as close as possible to the topic being researched, usually being first-hand testimony, experience or direct evidence. Primary sources can also include autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories. **Secondary sources** are materials that are written based on primary and other secondary sources. So for example, George Washington writing about one of his campaigns in his journal would be a primary source while a historian who writes about George Washington and his campaigns a hundred years later would be assembling a secondary source. You can find more information about primary sources from our primary source subject guide at http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/primary

Reliable versus Unreliable Sources

Good sources of information are usually the following:
- Articles published in scholarly journals (usually found in library databases)
- Books usually published by a major or well-known publisher
- Dissertations
- Government Websites
- Encyclopedias
- Libraries and Library Websites

Bad or unreliable sources of information are usually the following:
- Self-published Books
- Wikipedia
- Blogs
- Newspapers or general magazines
- Basically any source that does not properly cite materials or have an author

Citing Sources

Citation is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as "the action of citing or quoting any words or written passage, quotation". In plain English that means that if you use an article or book for your research or quote something that someone else said in your paper then you must list where you got it from. Proper citation is critical to good academic research. It is also an important step in avoiding **Plagiarism**. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Plagiarism as "the action or practice of taking someone else's work, idea, etc., and passing it off as one's own". In other words it is stealing and cheating by trying to pass off someone else's idea as something you came up with on your own. Plagiarism includes buying a paper from someone else as well as cutting and pasting from the web without citation. Please remember to be careful and cite all the sources you use in your paper. If you are in doubt about whether something should be cited, cite it! We have handouts that specifically deal with how to cite material in a variety of formats properly. They can be found online at: http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/citing_sources/

Summarize/Paraphrase/Quote

There are a variety of ways to include research in your paper. You can **summarize, paraphrase,** or **quote research.** Each of these methods are used in research for a variety of reasons including:
- To provide support for a claim you are making or trying to prove in your paper
- To refer to work or theories that you are using in your paper
- To call attention to a position that you agree or disagree with

When you **summarize** research in your paper, you are putting the main idea of the source in your own words in a shorter and broader manner. (Remember even when you summarize to make sure to attribute what you are summarizing back to the original source!) When you **paraphrase**, you are putting a specific passage or short part of the source materials in your own words. When you **quote**, you are putting a short extract of material from the source into your paper, identical to how it appears in the original. A quote must be an exact match from the original material and you must attribute the quote to the original author.

Databases

Most scholarly materials that you will use in research will be found in a database. There are a variety of databases available from the Library. Of those databases, many of them cover a wide range of subjects. Also while your first instinct may be to limit your researching to databases that deal specifically or mostly with your subject, it is worthwhile to look beyond that to databases that cover similar topics from different angles. So for instance while you may be interested in the criminal justice angle concerning the question of guns, it may be useful to look in a sociology or political science database that would cover the same topic but from a different viewpoint. Below is a list of databases that can be helpful when searching for research materials:

Academic Search Complete: This database is a general one meaning that it covers a wide variety of topics and subjects. If you are not sure where to start looking for material whenever you are beginning research on a paper of any topic, start here.

Criminal Justice Periodicals Index: This is the primary criminal justice database to begin with. It covers national and international topics from 1980 onward.

CQ Press Electronic Library: This database is the definitive reference resource for research in American government, politics, history, public policy, and current affairs. If you need information from a political science oriented direction, take a look here.

Gale Virtual Reference Library: This database is a collection of encyclopedias. It is your scholarly research substitute for Wikipedia.

JStor: This is one of the most popular databases available overall with students. All articles available in this database are scholarly materials. Be aware though that most of the articles here are very long so if you are working on a short paper it may not be worthwhile to search here.

Lexis-Nexis: This database covers legal materials and newspapers. If you are looking for a specific law or case, or you need a newspaper article (especially New York Times articles), this database is one you should take a look at.

PsycInfo: This database is the most comprehensive index and access to materials in psychology available.

SocIndex with Full Text: This database is one of the most heavily used sociology databases available from the library. It has an interface that is very similar to the one in Academic Search Complete.

Search Terms

Most library databases are best searched using **Boolean** searching. In a Boolean search, you choose words that best describe your topic and then connect them using either **AND**, **OR** or **NOT**. Here are some examples of Boolean searches:

Corpses **AND** insects – this retrieves information containing both words
Corpses **OR** cadavers – this retrieves information containing either word
Insects **NOT** beetles – this will retrieve information about insects but exclude information about beetles

You can even mix and match terms in a Boolean search:

(Corpses OR cadavers) AND insects – this will retrieve information containing the word insects as well as either the word corpses or the word cadavers

Now you might be wondering, how do I come up with keywords to use in my search? The answer is to narrow down your topic until you have a single research question your paper will explore. Then identify the main concepts in that question. Use those concepts as your search terms/keywords.

Subject Guides

The librarians here at the Lloyd Sealy Library work very hard to make sure that students have access to reputable and valid forms of information so that conducting research can be a breeze. As part of that effort, all librarians put together subject guides, also referred to as libguides or research guides, which are portals to high quality research information. Before you consider turning to a long and perhaps fruitless search on Google or Wikipedia take a look at the Libguides we have available through the library website. The link for the main subject guides page is: http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/

Related links

Library Website: http://www.lib.jjay.cuny.edu /
Statistics: http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/statistics/
Primary Sources: http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/primary/
Citing Resources: http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/citing_sources
How to Use the Library: http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/LibraryIntro/
Evaluating Resources: http://guides.lib.jjay.cuny.edu/evaluatingsources