

College Writing Course #5 – Writing Process – Research

How often has the 'blank page syndrome' bothered you? That feeling of 'NOW what do I do?' when faced with a paper to write. In this article I'll give you a checklist for organizing the first step – that is, refining your Topic and doing the literature search to back up the paper.

The Research process

Step 1 Create a Research Question.

In order to DO research you need to know when you have found relevant information. Even more important, in order to STOP doing research you need to know when you have ENOUGH information. In order to accomplish those two goals, your research topic has to be turned into a question. Not just "Shakespeare's Macbeth" that is WAY too broad but "Who are the important subordinate characters in Shakespeare's Macbeth?"

Think in terms of keywords. A starting question would use 3 or 4. For the above question they would be "subordinate", "characters", "Shakespeare", and "Macbeth."

Step 2 Preliminary research - Internet Sources

Begin with your favorite search engine. For the above question a starting query might be *subordinate+character+Shakespeare+Macbeth*. Get MORE results by REMOVING keywords get FEWER by adding keywords.

Be sure to keep track of web site/links and especially references to print books and authors. These links and books are clues you can follow to even more information.

Preliminary research - In-Print Sources

The difficulty in library research is more a matter of locating materials than of the scarcity of material to answer your research questions. Here is a list of the clues you should use in the effort

- Internet research will yield titles and authors
- Your textbook[s] has bibliographies.
- Your teacher may have referenced authors in class
- Look up your keywords in the indexes to subject encyclopedias. The articles in encyclopedias have bibliographies – take note of titles and authors.
- Periodical indexes and abstracts have citations to articles
- Every book you pull will have a bibliography



- **ASK A LIBRARIAN!** Too many students forget that a Librarian is an expert at locating sources in their collection

Step 3 Evaluate and Organize Findings

Now comes the fun! Look at each of your chosen sources – is it scholarly? What are the author’s credentials? Is it written for an academic audience? If it is not at the level you need, put it back now!

It is especially important to cross-reference and verify on-line sources. Remember - ANYone can post a web site!

Step 4 THINK

I include this because so often one forgets this part!

Step 5 Refine and Re-Write your Topic

Based on what you’ve found in your research you can now frame the FINAL question. Choose one you actually found references to answer, of course. Check that your Question fits the assigned Topic.

Step 6 Gather the works you will cite

Now you need to collect and organize your bibliographic references. You can do it [badly] with jotted scribbles on random papers. A nice job can be done [as your High School teacher no doubt required] on a deck of index cards.

Those days have passed, it seems to me. I use a simple, freely downloadable research organizer. Zotero lets me gather sources, organize them by the various projects I work on, and share them with colleagues. All good but the BEST part is that it interfaces directly with word processors so I can work faster and more accurately with my citations.

Whatever sources and organization method[s] you use you are now ready to outline and ultimately write your paper.

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