

The Research Process

This brief guide is designed to help you think about your research process and evaluate the quality of materials that can be found either in print or online.

Some of the points you need to consider before beginning your research process are:

- What is your **research question**? (i.e. what is it you are looking for?).
- What kind of **information** do you need?
- What **tools** are you going to use to find this information? (i.e. the Internet, the school library)
- How are you going to **find** this information? (i.e. if you are using Internet search engines, what keywords are you going to use?)
- How much **time** are you going to spend researching? (i.e. you could go on forever finding information, but you shouldn't. What would be a reasonable time frame for finding the information you need?)
- How are you going to **evaluate** your information? (i.e. when you are finished your research it is always useful to reflect on the process. What things worked, what things didn't, what would you do next time?).

Planning Your Search: Research Questions and Preliminary Information Gathering

Before even begin your research, a key first step is deciding on what type of information you are looking for and brainstorming where you might find your answers. In the space below, list out at least four significant questions you would like to answer during your research process.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Whether you are using the library's electronic card catalogue or a general search engine, it's important to condense your research questions into clearly defined keywords. Keywords that are too general may return you hundreds of thousands of hits. In order to avoid being overloaded with information, think carefully about what you are searching for.

For example, a search on Google for the word "India" returned 448 million hits! But a search for "India and Hindu wedding traditions" returned only 630,000 hits. This is still a large number, but much more useful. You can see how carefully selecting your keywords will help to shorten the time you spend wading through useless information.

Think of all the possible terms you might use for your subject. List 5-9 keywords below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____

Each search engine uses a slightly different language to help you with your searches, so it is worth the time it takes to read the search guides each engine provides. There are many different search engines, and a great place to start is InfoPeople's Best Search Tools page at www.infopeople.org/search/tools.html.

SOURCES:

Instruction and Research Services Committee, Hui Hua Chua, RUSA History Section at <http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/RUSA>, and SOFWEB at <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/internet/research.htm>

Evaluating Resources

Finding the information you want is only the first step. There is a lot of material available, but not all of it is equally reliable and useful. As a researcher, a large part of your job is not simply to find information, but to make judgments about its merit. Before you use any material you have found, you need to spend some time evaluating it for accuracy and importance. Use the following questions as a guide.

Evaluating Internet resources is not that different from evaluating other kinds of resources. You will need to consider the following aspects of each web resource you are considering using: can you trust the site's 1) authority, 2) currency, 3) author, and 4) bias.

Who put this information here?

The source of the material might give you a clue to its reliability. A site maintained by a university or government organization might be more reliable than one maintained by a private citizen.

- Many web site addresses include the name and type of organization sponsoring the webpage. The 3-letter domain codes and 2-letter country codes provide hints on the type of organization. Common domain codes are:

Domain	Sample Address
.edu = educational institution	http://www.wmich. edu
.gov = US government site	http://memory.loc. gov
.org = organization or association	http://www.theaha. org
.com = commercial site	http://www.historychannel. com
.museum = museum	http://nc.history. museum
.net = personal or other site	http://www.californiahistory. net

How old is the material?

Sometimes the age of information matters. If you need current statistics then check the age of the material you have found. As a rule of thumb, in most fields anything more than five years old is probably out-dated. But a site which deals with historical information may not need updating as frequently as one which is all about the latest political events. Just because information isn't regularly changed doesn't mean you shouldn't use it, but you need to be aware that your information is not necessarily the most recent.

Who wrote the information? Who is responsible for this information being here?

The status of the writer is often of considerable importance in deciding the reliability of information. You can probably assume that material written or otherwise provided by a known expert in the field is likely to be reliable. Just because you have never heard of the author of the page doesn't mean that the information is inaccurate or unreliable, but it does mean that you can't take it at face value. You might have to do some cross-checking, either elsewhere on the net, or with books or articles.

- Who is responsible for the website? Check for an Author**
Look for the name of the author or organization responsible for the page. Look for the following information:
 - Credentials -- who is the author or organization and what sort of qualifications do they have?
 - Contact address -- is an email or some other contact information given?
 - "About" link -- is there an "about," "background," or "philosophy" link that provides author or organizational information?

Why is this material here?

Who put the material on the Internet and why? Think about whether they might have some reason other than pure helpfulness for posting information. Many special interest groups have web pages, and while this doesn't necessarily mean the material is biased, it is something you need to think about. All sorts of groups now have web pages on the Internet, and obviously all of them have a message they are trying to get across. Think about what is being said, and why the material is there.

- **Is there a clear purpose or reason for this site?**

Websites can be created for a variety of purposes: to disseminate information, provide access to collections, support teaching, sell products, persuade, etc. Discovering the purpose can help determine the reliability of the site and the information it provides. Some pages explicitly state their purpose, others do not. To find information about the purpose:

- Check for an "about" link -- these links often provide some information about the purpose of the site.
- Find the homepage for the site -- sometimes page includes the "about" link or other clues on the purpose of the organization sponsoring the site.
- Look for an agenda -- are documents slanted in some way to persuade you? If the purpose of the website is to persuade, you should examine the material very closely before accepting it as fact.

Can I do a cross check?

Think about ways you might cross check the information you have found. You might have a look at another site with similar material, ask somebody who knows something about the topic, have a look at a book on the subject. Use your own experience as well. If you have already done some research in the area, you will already have some knowledge of the subject. How does this material fit in with what you already know?

Plagiarism & Citing Resources

What is Citing?

Citing simply means that you indicate which material is not your own and show where you got it from. Even if you have not used someone's exact words, but have rephrased their ideas, you need to give credit your sources. The idea is that someone else reading your work should be able to recognize the difference between your work and someone else's. You need to provide them with enough information about your sources that they could find the source for themselves.

In order to cite words correctly, you must keep track of where you found information. Every time you photocopy information from a book, print out pages from a website, take notes from a magazine, you should be writing down all the bibliographical information of each source.

There are two levels to MLA citation style: the **works cited page** and **parenthetical citations**. Use the following pages to help you keep track of the bibliographical information for your works cited. More information on plagiarism and parenthetical citations follows the section on creating a Works Cited.