

Mastering the Essay

Lesson 5 – The Research Paper, Part 1: Finding & Refining a Research Question

READINGS

- **How to Write a Research Question** (George Mason University)
https://d101vc9winf8ln.cloudfront.net/documents/16115/original/How_to_Write_a_Research_Question_ATI.pdf?1565039084
- **10 Research Question Examples to Guide your Research Project** (Scribbr)
<https://www.scribbr.com/research-process/research-question-examples/>
- **A Guide to Annotated Bibliographies** (George Mason University)
https://d101vc9winf8ln.cloudfront.net/documents/16101/original/A_Guide_to_Annotated_Bibliographies_ATI.pdf?1565035724
- **“How to Evaluate Information Resources”** (Memorial University)
- <http://www.library.mun.ca/researchtools/guides/doingresearch/evaluateall/>
- **“How to Evaluate Web Pages”** (Memorial University)
- <http://www.library.mun.ca/researchtools/guides/doingresearch/evaluateweb/>

You do not need to read the following references for class, but you will find them helpful for knowing how write citations for your upcoming assignments. For the sake of simplicity and mastery, this class will focus only on MLA style. Students should be aware that there are other styles (APA and Chicago are two of the most common), but that all styles are similar enough so that if you master one, it is easy to learn others when you need to.

- **"MLA In-Text Citation: The Basics"** (Purdue Writing Lab)
https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_in_text_citations_the_basics.html
- **“Citing a Book (MLA)”** (Purdue Writing Lab)
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_works_cited_page_books.html<https://www.easybib.com/guides/citation-guides/mla-format/how-to-cite-a-bible-mla/>
- **“Citing a Periodical (MLA)”** (Purdue Writing Lab)
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_works_cited_periodicals.html
- **“Citing a Web Source (MLA)”** (Purdue Writing Lab)
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_works_cited_electronic_sources.html
- **“Citing an Interview or Personal Communication”** (MLA) (Purdue Writing Lab)
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_works_cited_other_common_sources.html
- **“How to Cite the Bible”** (EasyBib, Chegg)
- <https://www.easybib.com/guides/citation-guides/mla-format/how-to-cite-a-bible-mla/>

WRITING & RESEARCH

- Over the next two weeks, you'll be writing a research paper—you'll use all the essay-writing skills you have gained so far and add new ones.
- A research paper is not merely a series of interesting facts about a topic, an encyclopedia entry, or book report. It backs up the thesis by means of extensive research rather than merely the author's opinion and experience.
- A researcher should always begin with a **research question** and only formulate a **working thesis** after **preliminary research**. Why? One should decide one's position based on the information one judges to be true in the research process. As in the scientific method, one begins with a question and a hypothesis which is tested, so in any kind of research, the researcher must be on an honest search for the truth. You have to be willing to find out that you are ignorant and/or wrong. A **working thesis** is an initial answer to the question which should change (maybe a little, maybe a lot) as you research and write.
 - **Examples of research questions:** "Has Canada been important in any way to space exploration?" or "Was Aztec civilization primitive or advanced?" These are not theses, but they give a good direction to focus your research. Try to think of a question that is not biased in itself, but leaves room for what you will learn. It should be a question that could lead to a definite thesis down the road. Great topic questions for research essays are commonly held beliefs that you have an inkling might not really be true, questions that are neither too broad (What is interesting about France?) nor too specific (What blood types did Napoleon's siblings have?).
- This week, you will formulate your **research question** and begin an **annotated bibliography**.

CREATING AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- An annotated research bibliography is a list of sources you feel would work well as the research backbone of your essay, with notes about why each source could prove helpful. It can be a tool for the student (helping your sort and think out what is actually useful to you and separate it from what is merely interesting but peripheral) and for your instructors (it gives them a sense of where you're at in your research, the way your paper is shaping up, and how they can help you). **Read the George Mason University handout about annotated bibliographies very carefully.**
- **NOTE: Research can be overwhelming, particularly if you have a stack of books from the library. How will you ever have time to read all those books?! Do not fear! You do not have to read a whole book to get a sense of what it's about! Read only the relevant passages to your work, and enough about the book to get a general sense of it. Rarely is it useful to read the entire book, instead use the introduction, the table of contents, and the index to find out 1) what is in the book and 2) which parts of the book are helpful. For example, to see what the whole book is about, check the back cover, introduction, or skim the first and last chapter. Students sometimes get**

bogged down by reading everything—work smarter, not harder!

BEGINNING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

- **First you need that research question.** Let's go back to the one proposed in the annotated bibliography section, "Who built Stonehenge and why?" Perhaps you know a little about Stonehenge already, but not a lot. Where does one begin? It's helpful to start with finding a few **overview** sources before you get into the weeds. For example, you might look at a few encyclopedia entries or the introduction to a book on Stonehenge at the library (intros will often give overviews). As you read, make some notes of **key words** or **topics** to research more. For example, as you read about Stonehenge, you might write down "Merlin myth" and "Neolithic Britons" as topics to research further.
 - **One helpful source for overviews can be Wikipedia.** Wikipedia is a powerful but limited tool that is best suited for beginning research. Think of it as your very smart (but sometimes wrong) friend—he's helpful, but you wouldn't cite him in a research paper. The most important parts of a Wikipedia page are the "References," "Bibliography," and "External Links" sections. These will lead you to other places on the internet with more specific information. Again, do not use Wikipedia as a source in a paper, but do use it to get a "lay of the land." **As you do research, take advantage of any bibliographies you find**—someone has already done some of the research for you, and you can piggyback on them.
- **After you do your initial overview research, see if you know enough to formulate that working thesis** which will change as you research further. Then, plan ahead using the following questions to try to figure out what additional resources you might need.
- Questions to ask as you approach a research paper (adapted from Purdue Writing Lab):
- **What kind of information are you looking for?**
 - Do you want facts? Opinions? News reports? Research studies? Analyses? Personal reflections? History?
- **Where would be a likely place to look?**
 - Which sources are likely to be most useful to you? Libraries? The Internet? Academic periodicals? Newspapers? Government records? If, for example, you are searching for information on some current event, a reliable newspaper will be a useful source. Are you searching for statistics on some aspect of the U.S. population? Then start with documents such as United States census reports. Do you want some scholarly interpretations of literature? If so, academic periodicals and books are likely to have what you're looking for. Want to know about commercial products? Will those companies have websites with information? Are you searching for local history? Then a county library, government office, or local newspaper archive is likely to be the most useful.
- **How much information do you need?**
 - How many sources of information are you looking for? Do you need to

- view both sides of the issue?
- Many research projects require both **primary and secondary sources**.

PRIMARY SOURCES

- Primary sources are created by people at the time of the event. For history, a primary source might be a chronicle from the time period or an eye witness report. For science, a primary source might be the report on a study.
- How do you evaluate primary sources for truth and accuracy? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of primary sources?

SECONDARY SOURCES

- A secondary source is any source written after the event or based on primary sources. There are lots of different kinds: books, articles, essays, encyclopedia entries, etc.
- How do you evaluate secondary sources for accuracy? What about the level of scholarship quality? Why is it important to be aware of these things?
- Using a library for serious research: Many students like to rely on the internet as it is "easier" than a library. Libraries, however, are still often the best sources for research—plus, they often have internet resources that you will not have access to on your own (like databases)
- **Not sure how to use a library for research? Librarians love to help you out—ask one if they have a little time to hear about your project and ask if they have any recommendations for you to read. They might turn you in a direction you had no idea would be helpful. Approaching a librarian can seem intimidating, but 99% of them love it!**
- Bring a notebook to the library with you, so that if you don't end up checking out a book but still get some information from it, you can note the book's information.
- What information should you note about a book? At the least the author's name, the title, the publisher, the city it was published in, the year it was released, and the numbers of the pages from which you got the information. These are very important for citing your sources.
- When you have more time than less, interlibrary loan is a lifesaver!

WEBSITES

- Be very careful conducting Internet searches. An enormous amount of horrible filth is on the Internet, as well as misinformation. Always make sure you have your parents' permission when you are browsing, that you are accountable and keep your family in the loop (don't open anything you wouldn't if your Jesus or your parents were in the room), and exercise good judgment in evaluating what pages to open. You can't unsee something once it is seen.

DATABASES

- It is hard to access these if you do not belong to an institution like a university, but you'll definitely want to be aware of them for your future essay writing

endeavors (explain what a database is). Oftentimes students can access databases through public or university libraries (even if they themselves are not students of those universities).

Assignment

Over the next two weeks, you will be writing a research paper. This week, you'll do the **preliminary research**, formulate a **working thesis**, and write half of an **annotated bibliography**. Choose one of the following topic questions:

- Are Canadians patriotic or unpatriotic?
- Was Robin Hood (or King Arthur, or some other legendary figure) a real person?
- Does it seem likely that someone other than Shakespeare authored his plays, or did he write them himself?
- Is illegal downloading of music and videos harmless?
- Do creation stories from different cultures really have something in common?
- Is screen time (watching shows, gaming, using social media, etc.) actually addictive in what it does to the brain, or is it entirely up to a person's free choice to stop or keep going?
- Is it accurate to call the Middle Ages "The Dark Ages?"
- Should people be allowed to talk on their telephones while they drive?
- To which country does the first Thanksgiving truly belong—the United States or Canada?
- Should someone looking for a new car consider electric vehicles?
- Should Canada build more nuclear reactors for electricity production?
- Who built Stonehenge and why?
- What ancient peoples built the large cities in the Amazon and how?

Choose a **research question** and begin your research. If at all possible, you need to make a trip to a library. Based on your research, come up with a **working thesis**. Clearly state it at the top of the document. Follow it with an **annotated bibliography of 3-4 sources** that you think will be helpful in writing your essay. Next week, you will fill in your research with an additional 3-5 sources. Your annotated bibliography should not simply be a list of every source you read, but only of the ones that you think likely to have information you'll use in your essay. List sources in alphabetical order by author's name, and include a MLA citation for each source, followed by a few sentences describing the work and why it is a good source for your essay. *Review the George Mason University handout on annotated bibliographies.*