



The Library

Term Paper Research: Getting Started

When you search for information on a topic, save time and avoid frustration by planning a research strategy.

FIRST, DEVELOP YOUR TOPIC You must develop a focus or point of view. As well, your topic should not be too broad nor too narrow. If it's too broad, you won't be able to cope with time or length constraints. If it's too narrow or obscure, materials will be difficult or impossible to find. Try to state your topic as a question. Then, identify the main concepts or keywords.

Here's an example:

Pierre Elliot Trudeau	<i>too broad</i>
Pierre Elliot Trudeau's legacy and Canada's foreign policy	<i>too broad</i>
→ How did Trudeau shape Canada's foreign policy in the 1970's?	<i>good choice</i>
Trudeau's influence on Vancouver city government	<i>too narrow</i>

The keywords are **trudeau** and **foreign policy**.

NEXT, CONSIDER THE KIND OF INFORMATION YOU'LL NEED Will you need historical or current materials? Should you consult primary sources? Does your topic concern a particular geographic area or time period? Should you include technical data or statistics?

HERE'S A BASIC RESEARCH STRATEGY, STEP BY STEP Adapt this strategy to your needs. The time you spend on each step will vary according to your topic.

1. Find an overview An overview or summary from a general source such as an **encyclopedia**, **dictionary**, or **textbook** provides background, definitions, and key ideas. You can test your main concepts or keywords. If you haven't developed a point of view, an overview will help you focus your research and provide a context. It often includes a list of books and articles for further reading. Ask a librarian to help you find an encyclopedia, handbook or textbook.

2. Find books Books are the most comprehensive and easiest to obtain sources of information. In the UBC LIBRARY ONLINE CATALOGUE, look up any books cited in your overview. Then to find more, search by subject or keyword. Also, browse on the bookshelves in relevant call number areas. For help, ask a librarian or check *How to Find Books* available in the libraries and on the UBC Library web site (www.library.ubc.ca).

3. Find journal articles Journal articles provide sharply focused information on **recent events**, **discoveries**, or **research**. They do not provide background. Were any articles cited in your overview or in the books you've found? If not, or if you need more, look up your topic in an appropriate article index. For more information check *How to Find Articles* available in the libraries and on the UBC Library web site. To identify an appropriate article index, ask a librarian for help.

4. Look for a bibliography, statistics, etc. A bibliography is a published list of **book** and/or **article citations**. If it's "annotated", each book or article is summarized. The Library will not have a bibliography on every topic. But if you find one, you can see immediately how much information there is. Then use the UBC LIBRARY ONLINE CATALOGUE to find out if the books and articles are in the Library. Other forms of information include **statistics**, **government publications**, **pamphlets**, **microforms**, and more. Ask for help.

5. Look for information on the World Wide Web

Use Internet **search engines** and **subject directories** to find materials on the Web. At the UBC Library Web home page, click on **Find**, then scroll down the **Websites**, or go to www.library.ubc.ca/home/isearch.html.

YOU ALSO NEED TO EVALUATE YOUR SOURCES

What is the scope or content?

Is the discussion of your topic detailed and comprehensive? Does the work update other sources or add new information? Evaluate books by skimming prefaces, tables of contents and indexes. Evaluate articles by scanning them or reading abstracts (summaries).

Who is the intended audience?

Popular sources written for the general public oversimplify, provide only partial information, and generally do not include bibliographies (lists of sources cited).

Scholarly sources are more challenging to read, but offer greater depth and detail. They also usually include footnotes or bibliographies.

Is the author an authority?

Try to learn something about him/her. What is the author's institutional affiliation or educational background?

What is the author's point of view?

Is the viewpoint balanced, objective, unbiased?

Is it a scholarly press?

Some publishers, especially university presses, publish works appropriate for scholarly research while others publish popular works for the general public.

What is the date of your source?

The only useful sources on a topic that is new and changing rapidly are those just published. If you need an historical perspective, you can also use older books and articles.

BE SURE TO KEEP A RECORD

Keep a detailed list of all sources you intend to use. You'll need to cite them in your footnotes and bibliography. For information go to *MLA Style: Getting Started* available in the libraries and on the UBC Library home page under **Find**.

BOOKS TO HELP YOU WRITE YOUR PAPER

- Berry, Ralph. *The research project: how to write it*. LB2369.B38 2000 Koerner Library
- Buckley, Joanne. *Fit to Print: the Canadian Student's Guide to Essay Writing*. LB2369.B83 1998 Koerner Library, Education Library
- Robertson, Hugh. *The Research Essay: a Guide to Essays and Papers*. LB 2369.R633 1999 Education Library

There are many more. In the [UBC LIBRARY ONLINE CATALOGUE](#), search the subject: **report writing**.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Primary Sources/ Secondary Sources

Primary sources are the original words of a writer - novel, speech, eyewitness account, letter, autobiography, interview, or results of original research...

Secondary sources are works about somebody or about somebody's accomplishments...writings about the primary sources and about the authors who produce primary material.

(From *Writing Research Papers; a complete guide* by James D. Lester. New York, HarperCollins College, 1996, p. 110)

Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a form of academic misconduct in which an individual submits or presents the work of another person as his or her own. Scholarship quite properly rests upon examining and referring to the thoughts and writings of others. However, when excerpts are used in paragraphs or essays, the author must be acknowledged through footnotes or other accepted practices.

(From *The University of British Columbia Calendar 2002/2003*, p. 48)