

# Library Research: The Information Search Process

The following is a guide to the library research process. It is descriptive, not prescriptive; Instead of telling you how you should do research, it gives you key insights into how you probably will do research. More importantly, it helps you get through each stage and on to the finished project.

## Stage 1: Task Initiation

**What is This?** Stage 1 is when you first realize that you need to find some information. (Probably because your teacher has just given you a research assignment!) Your job here is simply to understand the task at hand so you can move on to choosing a topic. First, you need to clarify all the details of what you have to do: Do you have to write a paper? If so, how many pages? Do you have to make a poster, build a model, or give a presentation in class? Do you have to have a minimum number of sources or use certain ones?

**What Should I Expect?** It's normal to feel nervous and even confused at this point, because you aren't sure exactly what you have to do or how much time it will take. (Or you might feel an overwhelming sense of dread because you DO know!) If you are excited and can't wait to dig in to the research, you should probably seek mental help! Or consider a career as a college professor. Or both...

**What Should I Do?** While it helps to discuss the assignment with your friends to make sure you understand it, make sure you double-check your assumptions with your teacher. Try to ask your questions in class, because your classmates are probably wondering about the same things you are. Also, if the teacher says something like, "I think we'll move the due date back a week so it doesn't interfere with spring break" you'll have plenty of witnesses!

## Stage 2: Topic Selection

**What is This?** The task here is to pick a general topic to investigate, nothing specific yet. In Stage 1, you probably learned how much choice you will have in picking your topic. The teacher might assign you a specific topic, give you a list to choose from, or let you make up your own. Whatever the situation, you should try to get a topic you are interested in. Research projects are a lot less painful if you have a topic you enjoy.

**What Should I Expect?** The bad news is that you will probably still feel nervous and confused, because you are still sorting it all out. The good news is that once you do choose a topic, you'll probably feel good just to have that part done. With any luck, you will have a topic you are actually interested in. If so, you might even be looking forward to it a little bit. (Don't worry, your secret is safe with me.)

**What Should I Do?** The most important thing to do is get going. The other stages take a long time, so you want to get this one out of the way early. You can begin by jotting down a list of what interests you about the subject. What is the most interesting thing you have studied in the class so far? Was there anything you wanted to know more about? Also, it will usually help to ask your teacher or your school librarian for suggestions. If you have some ideas, they can tell you which ones might make good topics. Finally, make sure you discuss it with your friends. Just talking about it (or writing about it in your blog) will help you get it sorted out.

### **Stage 3: Topic Exploration**

**What is This?** The key word here is exploration. Your purpose here is to learn enough about your general topic that you can choose a specific focus in the next stage. If you are researching a topic that is new to you, you'll want to get some general background information on it. Even if you already know a lot about your topic, you should find out what sources are available to extend your knowledge. You don't need to gather a lot of specific details yet, just learn the general concepts and ideas.

**What Should I Expect?** There's no sugarcoating it: This is often the most difficult part of the process. Since you are exploring unknown territory, it makes sense for you to feel lost. You may have difficulty finding information, and some of the information you find may be hard to understand. Some of it may even contradict what you already know or what other sources say.

**What Should I Do?** It's OK to freak out, just don't give up. Here are some suggestions to help you get through it:

- Get started early. It will take a while for your brain to soak in all the new information you will find, so give yourself plenty of time. You can't do this the night before the assignment is due.
- Before you search, take a few minutes to think about *how* you will search. Brainstorm a list of keywords you might use, and try to think of several words and phrases for each concept. Also, write down a list of sources that you plan to use. You will add to and modify these lists as you go, but it is important to start with a plan.
- Start simple. Look in the encyclopedia first. Make sure to check the index in the print encyclopedia or use the full-text search in the online version.
- Ask for help. Your librarian can't be all that scary, right? Ask for suggestions on good sources and how to use them. Also, check out your school library's website to see what recommendations you might find there.
- Don't worry about taking a lot of specific notes, but it is helpful to jot down a few general ones: good sources, search words that work for you, and ideas that you find most interesting (things that you might want to focus on when you narrow down your topic).
- Talk about what you learn with your friends, parents, teachers, librarians, or anyone who will listen. If you have a blog, you may want to start a new thread just to write about this project. Talking or writing about what you learn will help your brain sort it out and make sense of it.
- No one looks forward to staring at a computer screen for hours or slaving over a hot photocopier, but hang in there!

### **Stage 4: Focus Formulation**

**What is This?** Now you will need to find a specific focus for your project, a target that all of the rest of your work will aim at. (For example, if your project is a research paper, this is the point you would need to write an initial thesis statement.) If you have thoroughly explored the topic and allowed time for that knowledge to gel, you probably encountered some interesting ideas or issues that you could choose from. You just have to choose one perspective that interests you and that you can find enough information on to produce your final project.

**What Should I Expect?** Now that you know a lot more about your topic, you should begin to feel more confident. You can't see the light at the end of the tunnel just yet, but you're starting to sense that it's there!

**What Should I Do?** Review the general notes you took in Stage 3 for any aspects of your topic that might become your focus. Check with your teacher and your librarian to see which ones best satisfy the assignment and are easiest to find information on.

## **Stage 5: Information Collection**

**What is This?** Now that you have chosen a focus for your project, your next task is to find the specific information you need to support that focus. Some of it will be from sources you found in the exploration stage, but you will probably also need to go back and get more specific information.

**What Should I Expect?** When you first begin this stage, the task of gathering all this information may seem overwhelming. However, you should be more interested in doing it because you have chosen a focus that interests you. You've come this far, so you know you can do it!

### **What Should I Do?**

- You are only after information that specifically relates to your chosen focus, so always be aware of what you need. Think of it as finding the missing pieces of the puzzle. Don't get distracted by pieces that don't fit your puzzle, and don't waste time collecting puzzle pieces that you already have in place.
- At this point, you will also need to take specific notes from your sources and record the bibliographic details (author, title, year, etc.) for each source. As you take notes, remember to write down how the information relates to your focus.
- This is an especially good time to ask your librarian for help. They are experts at this, so they can lead you to some of those obscure sources that will really impress your teacher!

## **Stage 6: Presentation of Findings**

**What is This?** Now you can begin producing your final product - writing the paper, assembling the presentation, or making the poster.

**What Should I Expect?** Ideally, you will feel a sense of satisfaction now that you really have a good grasp of your information. If your topic wasn't interesting or wasn't what you expected, you might be somewhat disappointed, but either way you can enjoy a sense of relief when you finish!

**What Should I Do?** Before you begin producing your product, you need to organize your information. Here are some tips to help:

- As you assemble the information for your final product, you should always keep two questions in your mind: 1) How does each piece of information relate to my focus (thesis statement or theme)? and 2) What are the major categories of information that relate to my focus? These questions, along with the requirements of the assignment, will determine the structure of your final product.
- It helps most people to make some kind of outline or visual structure. (Use Word, PowerPoint, Inspiration or some other software so that you can easily re-arrange things to find the best fit.) Also, don't forget to ask your teacher and librarian for help, and keep sharing your thoughts and ideas with your friends and writing them in your journal or blog.

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This guide was created in 1995 by Andy Spinks. It was adapted from the Information Search Process (ISP) framework created by Carol Kuhlthau of Rutgers University, who knows more about this stuff than anybody. Check out her web site to see the latest research and information on the Information Search Process: <https://comminfo.rutgers.edu/~kuhlthau/>