

The Library Research Process: At Your WVC Library

This research guide is designed for students who are new to academic research. The five major phases of the research process are:

1. Reading the Assignment – understanding what your instructor expects of you.
2. Developing a Topic – the reading, thinking, and writing that are part of your research process.
3. Searching for Information – finding and accessing information from the library, the web, and elsewhere.
4. Choosing Your Sources – determining what information is reliable and relevant to your topic.
5. Citing Sources – learning how to cite sources properly.

AT ANY TIME IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS, YOU MAY CONTACT WVC LIBRARY STAFF FOR ASSISTANCE.

Reading the Assignment:

Are you constantly wondering what your instructor wants? She may be telling you, but it's hidden within the assignment sheet, more like buried treasure!

Different types of assignments will come with different requirements. A pro/con or argumentative paper will be structured much differently from a critical essay. Usually, the basic structure of the paper/project will be laid out for you in the assignment sheet. Also look for clues like “analyze” and “summarize” or “briefly explain”. This will tell you when to use your own voice in your paper and when to stay neutral, or how much time to spend on any one element of your assignment. If you still feel lost after reading your assignment, **talk to your instructor immediately.**

Developing a Topic:

Once you clearly understand the assignment and your instructor's expectations, you can begin to develop a topic. You may be given a very specific topic, you may be instructed to choose from a list, or you may have the freedom to write about any topic you choose. Each of these options presents challenges. Assigned topics may not be interesting to you which makes it difficult to stay on task. If you have the option to choose your own topic, you may be overwhelmed by the almost endless possibilities.

Whatever manner that you arrive at a topic, remember that it will be developing throughout the writing assignment. As you gather research and write drafts of your paper, you will probably revise and refine your topic. Your initial topic may be too broad to effectively gather data for your paper. Or, your topic may be so narrow that you can't find information to cite in your paper.

Whenever possible, select a topic that interests you. To do that, try skimming your textbook or using a database like CQ Researcher to “Browse by topic”. Visiting current news sites will help you find current topics. You can also try browsing through an encyclopedia either in the library reference section or online. To narrow your topic, try limits such as time period, geographic location, or characteristics. Search with more specific search terms or re-state your subject. Compose a thesis statement and

identify the main concepts. Library staff can assist you with identifying a research topic or narrowing your topic into a research statement.

Searching for Information:

Information collection is a process. You will start with identifying search terms you think are most likely to find the best results. By using these terms repeatedly in multiple resources, you will see if these terms are working for your project/paper. You may identify other terms along the way that may be broader or narrower. Once you've identified the best terms, use them in a variety of resources to find the best information.

You may need to search an encyclopedia, dictionary, a newspaper database, and a subject-specific database to help you find appropriate academic information. Search every place that you think you may find helpful information.

The library offers databases to assist you in finding appropriate academic information easily. The databases will help you find journal articles, reference books, newspaper or magazine articles, images and maps. Full text is available in most of the databases along with citation tools. Be sure that you are searching for the most appropriate information. Review what your instructor is asking. Articles? Books? Music? Interviews? Remember, databases can provide you with articles and other data not available on the web. The library catalog will provide you with information about books, movies, and other materials owned by the library. Don't give up if the library doesn't own the item you want. Request a book through I-Share if it is not available in your library. I-Share is an interlibrary loan system that allows you to borrow books from participating academic libraries in Illinois. You may also request online versions of magazine or journal articles that the library does not own. Make your request through the Circulation Desk staff. Library staff can help you find the items you need..... just ask!

Choosing Your Sources:

You may arrive at a point where you have source overload. When it comes to a research project, it's always better to have too much rather than too little. You will have to take a good look at your sources and decide what to use. How do you choose? There are many ways to evaluate your sources. There are two basic categories of sources – primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources reflect the individual viewpoint of a participant or observer. Some primary sources are diaries, letters, photos, posters, and interviews. Usually, secondary sources are accounts written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. They interpret and evaluate primary sources. Some secondary sources are dictionaries, encyclopedias, journal articles, magazine and newspaper articles, books (other than fiction and autobiographies), and web sites. *Primary sources can be taken at face value but you will have to critically evaluate secondary sources.*

One method of evaluating secondary sources is the *CRAAP Test*. The *CRAAP Test* was originally developed to evaluate web sources, but the criteria work very well for both print and electronic sources.

Currency – The timeliness of the information.

Relevance/Coverage – The depth & importance of the information.

Authority – The source of the information.

Accuracy – The reliability of the information.

Purpose/Objectivity – The possible bias present in the information.

For each source you have found, judge it using the above criteria.

The CRAAP Test was developed by the Meriam Library at California State University Chico.

You may have a research assignment that limits you to only scholarly and/or peer reviewed sources. The terms are used almost interchangeably in an academic setting. *Scholarly sources* include articles and books written by a scholar or professional in the field and are often used to report original research or experimentation. They usually include specialized vocabulary and are aimed at an academic audience. *Peer reviewed sources* come from scholarly journals that use a process of peer review before publishing an article so that other scholars or experts in the author's field or specialty critically assess a draft of the article. This process helps ensure that the published articles reflect scholarship in their field. Peer-reviewed journals may also be called *refereed journals*.

Tips for Choosing Sources:

1. Look for sources that support both sides of an argument.
2. Just because it comes to you in Google search, doesn't mean it's true. Look at author information when deciding to use a website in a paper.
3. A *USA Today* article doesn't carry the same weight as a *New York Times* article; choose your sources carefully.
4. Limiting a web search to just .edu or .gov can help filter out information you don't want. Use the advanced search in Google to do this.

Citing Sources:

As you begin presenting arguments in a research paper, you will draw upon previous work of other authors. When you do so, it is essential to cite those sources. Citing gives the authors proper credit for their ideas and lets your reader know where to go for additional information. You will cite journal articles, books, and websites for the most part. The key parts of a citation are the author, title of the work, and publication information. Additional information will vary according to what you cite. Many libraries subscribe to citation software such as *Son of Citation Machine* which will assist you in organizing and citing your source. **Your instructor has the final say regarding how information is to be cited for their assignment. Always make sure that you understand exactly what your instructor wants.**

Tips for citing sources:

1. You must cite a source even if you do not directly quote from the source. Paraphrasing another's idea requires you to acknowledge the author.
2. If you do directly quote a source, use quotation marks to show you are using the author's exact words.
3. When taking notes from a source, be sure to get all of the required information to cite the source completely.
4. Follow the citation style your instructor requires.

Remember, library staff are here to assist you in your research. Don't be shy about asking for help!

Much of the information given here was developed by the Ronald Williams Library staff at Northeastern Illinois University for the ERIAL project (www.erialproject.org).