

TCE
TIPS

A GUIDE TO ESSAY WRITING

VOL. 1

RESEARCH TIPS

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

A GREAT FINAL PRODUCT IS BUILT UPON THE FOUNDATION OF GREAT RESEARCH. JUST AS THE WORD SUGGESTS, RESEARCH INVOLVES “SEARCHING.” DOING RESEARCH CAN BE CHALLENGING, AND, IF DONE IN AN ORGANIZED MANNER AND WITH GOOD DOCUMENTATION, CAN ALSO BE INTERESTING AND REWARDING. ONCE YOU HAVE EXPLORED DIFFERENT SOURCES, LEARNED THE FACTS, AND CONSIDERED WHAT OTHER PEOPLE HAVE TO SAY ABOUT A TOPIC, YOU CAN THEN DRAW YOUR OWN CONCLUSIONS!

STEP 1: PREPARE FOR RESEARCH

Research projects always begin with a topic, but that’s not enough to start your research. Whether it is a very broad topic or a focused one, you need to think carefully about what it is you want to know about your chosen area of study. You need a good question related to your topic!

WHAT MAKES A GOOD INQUIRY QUESTION?

- » **It is open-ended** — “why” and “how” are generally good starting words, and “what” can work, too, but avoid “where” and “when” as those often lead to a simple answer with little value for building an argument.
- » **It is focused** — if it’s too broad, research becomes unmanageable.
- » **It is not easily answered** — you’ll have to do research and explore the question further.
- » **It could have multiple answers** — a research essay is based on an argument, and your inquiry question shouldn’t have just one “right” answer or one path to the answer.
- » **It leads to more questions** — it shouldn’t have yes/no/basic fact answers, but should lead you to ideas that you can build into evidence.
- » **It is researchable** — you should reasonably expect to find online or print resources to assist you.

It is critical that you go about answering your question with an open mind, rather than with a pre-determined, particular outcome that you are just trying to find research to support.

As your research evolves, your inquiry question may even change. Be open to this, too! As you learn more, you may shift the focus of your research.

STEP 2: LOCATE RESOURCES

BASIC SOURCE OPTIONS TO EXPLORE

TYPE	BENEFITS	CONSIDERATIONS
Print books and periodicals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » have been through the publishing and review process » clear author » limited number available » can select appropriate reading level » often put all important information in one place » often have an index or table of contents to help you easily find relevant information » usually include sources of the information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » not always up to date » not as convenient to access » not always available in your local library or bookstore » sometimes more challenging to find information about uncommon topics
E-books and digital periodicals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » have been through the publishing and review process » clear author » can select appropriate reading level » often put all important information in one place » often have an index, table of contents, or search tool to help you easily find relevant information » usually include the sources of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » many older sources have been digitized, so don't assume they are up to date » may be behind a paywall or the sign-in page of a library or scholarly database » sometimes more challenging to find information about uncommon topics
General online (e.g., websites, blogs, YouTube, and podcasts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » much wider variety » can explore more obscure topics » often more up-to-date » easily accessible as long as you have internet available » textual sources are easily searchable with a browser or app's "Find" feature » can translate textual sources in other languages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » credibility sometimes lacking for websites and blogs, as no one is necessarily reviewing facts and sources — journals and online encyclopedias are more credible » author not always clearly identified » number of sources available can be overwhelming » can sometimes be too narrow and focused on a specific topic
Oral histories (interviews)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » offer personalized details and perspective » often share emotions not easily captured in other sources » interviewer can easily probe for more information and details » often more engaging to interact with and learn from 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> » can be biased (though all sources can!) » rely on memory of interviewee » interviewer must record the conversation or take thorough notes » locating appropriate interviewees and booking time with them can take time and persistence

IDENTIFYING A GOOD SOURCE

Doing research can be overwhelming, particularly online where there are millions of sources. To determine whether a source is valuable, ask yourself these important questions:

Appropriateness

- » Is the information relevant to your inquiry question?
- » Is the information presented at an appropriate level for your purpose?
- » Is the intention of the source to inform the reader, as opposed to entertaining them or selling them something?

Credibility

- » Who is the author or organization responsible for the information?
- » Is the author qualified to write on the topic? What are their credentials?

Accuracy

- » Is the information supported by evidence as opposed to being mostly opinion?
- » Does any of the information match that of another source or your own personal knowledge?
- » Does the author feature different perspectives where possible?
- » Does the source contain credible bibliographic references?

Currency

- » Does the source include a publication date or “last updated” date that is current?
- » Does your area of study require current information or could older sources work too?
- » Has the source been revised or updated? If it’s a website, do all the links work?

TIPS FOR ONLINE RESEARCH

Search tips

- » Use keywords when conducting an online search. A research question and a search term are not interchangeable. For example, type “women clothing 1960s Canada” into Google, **not** “what did women wear in the sixties in Canada?”
- » Use as few words as possible in your search. For example, type “Confederation causes,” **not** “reasons why colonies joined Confederation in 1867.”
- » Rework your terms to refine your search. Consider other keywords or synonyms that would get at the same idea. Use your thesaurus! For example, if you are exploring children’s school experiences, you could try “education” or “schooling” or “school system” or “public schools.”
- » Do not just click the first site that comes up. Sometimes the 4th, 10th, or even the 15th website can be much better. Note that the first links that appear in a search are often sponsored links, which means they are paid for by advertisers and are not always particularly relevant to your search.

Credibility and fact checking

- » Check the website's bibliography, if there is one. If you can find the original source of the content, it is always better to use it rather than a summary of it.
- » Where possible, use a mix of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources can help you check the interpretations, summaries, and quotes you find in secondary sources.
- » Consult multiple sources on the same topic and cross-reference findings to ensure that your facts are correct.
- » Consider multiple perspectives on the same topic, because facts can be interpreted in different ways. Think about what facts or perspectives might be left out.
- » Consider the possible bias of the source.
- » Pay attention to your instincts. If a detail seems out of place or incorrect, investigate further.
- » Use a reliable fact-checking website to confirm your own assessment.

Online tools

- » Use Google News to find recent news articles about your topic.
- » Look at video resources, which can include excerpts from news programs or helpful TED Talks about a variety of topics.
- » Search online encyclopedias, preferably those that are not created by users and do not have open editing policies. Entries in reputable online encyclopedias will be created and reviewed by credible experts.
- » Explore your library's databases. Databases offer scholarly articles and news articles written by professionals in the field. They are reviewed and updated regularly to maintain the credibility of their sources. Advanced search tools on databases allow you to more effectively locate high-quality sources related to your research. And best of all, scholarly databases are advertisement-free!
- » Check to see if your school library has created a curated research guide about your topic.

Online databases

- » Begin by determining keywords related to your inquiry question. See tips above about removing unnecessary words and using synonyms to strengthen your search.
- » If any of your search terms are phrases, it may be helpful to place them in double quotes to let the database know that you are looking for that particular combination of words together. For example, type "child poverty," otherwise you will get results for anything that includes "child" or "poverty."
- » Use a system called Boolean logic to refine your searches.
 - » If you use "AND" between words or phrases, your results will include articles that contain all search terms.
 - » If you use "OR" between words or phrases, your results will include articles that contain at least one of the terms, but not necessarily all.
 - » If you include "NOT" in your search, you can limit your results so that they do not contain any of the terms that follow "NOT:"
 - » Enclosing OR statements in parentheses helps ensure that your search works as intended.
Example: Confederation AND Canada AND (causes OR origins OR reasons) NOT Belgium

- » By using the Advanced Search function, you can narrow your search to include such things as articles with a certain publication date, only articles which are available in full text format, articles of a certain length, or articles from a particular type of source.
- » Look for the option to obtain results only from peer-reviewed sources or scholarly articles. This option ensures that all articles have been checked for quality of work and research by experts in the field. These are some of the most credible sources available.

TIPS FOR LIBRARY RESEARCH

- » Don't forget about the library! Your computer will not necessarily give you all the answers you need.
- » Use keywords when searching the library catalogue.
- » Ask the librarian for help. They know their collections best, both print and online, and can often point you in a helpful direction or suggest resources you might not have thought or known about.
- » When you go to the shelves to locate a book, scan the other books in that general area. Resources are shelved alongside similar subject matter, so you can often find something helpful right nearby that may not have come up in your catalogue search.
- » Use the table of contents or index in a book to direct you to the specific part(s) that will be most helpful.

TIPS FOR ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH

Considerations

- » Oral history is an account of the past shared through word of mouth and is the oldest type of historical record. It comes in many forms, including traditional songs and stories, though interviews are the most common form today.
- » Oral history relies on the memories of people who participated in or observed events, or on traditional knowledge passed down over generations. It can provide insights and perspectives on history that are not found in other sources.
- » Many academic historians tend to be suspicious of oral history. They argue that people's memories can be distorted by time and that stories include personal bias.
- » Carefully consider whether information from oral histories should be included in your final product.

Effective interviews

- » Ask brief, open-ended questions — the interviewer should speak very little.
- » Ask one question at a time and allow for a full response before moving on.
- » Allow for silence — give the interviewee time to process the question and think about their answer, particularly if you are engaging in oral history.
- » Record the interview so you can focus on the conversation and listen to it again later.
- » Have a pen ready to make a few notes. If you think of something while the interviewee is speaking, jot it down so you do not need to interrupt.
- » Arrange for only you and the interviewee to be present in the room (or in the background of a call) to avoid distractions.

TIPS FOR RESEARCH IN GENERAL

- » Be patient and take the time to dig. You are not going to get all the information that you want from one source. You have to consult multiple sources to fully explore a topic.
- » Skim a website or book before you start taking notes to ensure that it is actually a helpful source.
- » Reading the first and last line of each paragraph can be a starting point, offering a quick overview of what the author is sharing.
- » Avoid being distracted by interesting details that are not relevant to your research question.
- » As you do research, investigate the sources the author refers to — you can use their footnotes to find more sources for your own research!
- » Read the visuals on a page, too. Maps, graphics, charts, illustrations, photographs, different fonts — all can be helpful.

STEP 3: PROCESS INFORMATION

MAKE EFFECTIVE RESEARCH NOTES

- » Start with full a bibliographic entry so that you can return to your sources and give credit for information.
- » Write point-form notes in your own words to ensure that you have processed and understood the information and to avoid plagiarism.
- » When you paraphrase, you must change both the words and the sentence structure, but you may keep the same level of detail. You must directly refer to the author if you use paraphrased material in your final piece.
- » If you are summarizing, you are capturing the key ideas of a text in a much shorter passage.
- » For more details and examples of paraphrasing versus summarizing, click [here](#).
- » **Never copy and paste** unless you place the direct quote in quotation marks and note the exact source so that you can give credit.
- » Note the relevant page numbers of a text or the specific section of a website in case you need to return to source.
- » Make note of any helpful visuals such as charts, primary documents, and photographs.
- » Every time you start making notes from a new source, add a clear heading to separate them from your earlier notes.

SAMPLE RESEARCH NOTES TEMPLATE

Use a new template for each of your sources to keep your records organized.

Research question:

Keywords to search:

Proper bibliographic entry for this source:

Ideas to focus on in this source:

Point-form notes in my own words:

- »
- »
- »
- »

Direct quotations:

CREATE A PROPER BIBLIOGRAPHY

[CLICK HERE](#) to access the “Creating a Bibliography” guide.

STEP 4: TRANSFER LEARNING

Apply your research to whatever task you are undertaking, e.g., essay, historically accurate art piece or poem, presentation, debate or role play.

If your final product is an essay, [CLICK HERE](#) for the “Writing an Essay” worksheet.