Durham
University

Skills:
Research

Research Skills

These can seem like a complicated set of skills you're just expected to 'have'. The reality is that they are not complicated at all and you certainly do have them whether you realise it or not. Take a moment to imagine this scenario:

You are organising a trip to the cinema for a group of friends.

This, or situations like this are things that we all come across in our day to day lives. In order to successfully organise a trip, you will naturally be employing your research skills.

What we need to know:

Who wants to go? What day? What time? Which cinema? How much will it cost for the ticket? How expensive are refreshments? How do we get there? Where shall we meet? What film shall we see? Are there any discounts?

How we could find the information:

Search engine. Cinema website. Bus timetables. Train timetables. Talking to each other. Calling the cinema. Online maps.

The result:

A successful trip to the cinema where everybody meets at the right time and place to see a film they want to, with reasonably priced tickets and refreshments.

That, in essence, is a research project from start to finish, and works no differently from the journey of research you will go on for any essay or project. It's about working out what you need to know, finding out where to get this information and reporting your findings.

Devising a Research Strategy

A research strategy is, very simply, a plan of how you will undertake your research. This is the foundation of any project so it's important to take the time to get it right. There are many ways to plan your research and really it comes down to personal preference. Some people like to make spider diagrams, others lists or grids. See our Using Sources document for ideas to help you work out what questions you need to ask. Your research strategy, just like your essay or project plan, needs to be flexible whilst ensuring the content stays relevant – research always leads to more questions!

Once you know what questions you need to ask, it's time to work out where your answers will come from. It will completely depend on your subject area as to which sources are likely to be most useful to you, but here are a few to consider:

Internet sources	Newspapers	Maps
Photographs	Books	Letters
Journals/articles	TV	Radio
Field or site reports	Talking to people	Objects or artefacts

For a full explanation of the positive and negative aspects of using each of these, please see our guide dedicated entirely to Using Sources (the link can be found under further resources at the end of this document). Here you will also find information relating to primary and secondary sources, in addition to how to critically evaluate a particular source to assess its reliability and usability.

Effective Research

The key to effective research is partly in the planning because this will save you a great deal of time, but also the way in which you approach a particular source. Imagine you are writing an essay on 'Women's role in Medicine during the Medieval Period' and you find a book directly related to your subject (see image) but you also find another 10 books on medieval medicine, perhaps some journal articles, a TV programme to watch, some interesting websites, perhaps even a Podcast to listen to – well done on your excellent breadth of sources!

Do you have time to read those 10 books cover to cover, and all the articles, and read all the website pages plus watch and listen to the other media? (Remember this is just the research phase – you still have to actually write the essay!)

If you've started your work early, then perhaps you do have time, and if you are extremely interested in the topic of medieval medicine then you may well want to, but effective research for the above essay topic does not require you to.

MEDIEVAL MEDICINE
by
JAMES WALSH

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Let's look at that first book as an example.

This is the contents page of the book. Based on your essay title: 'Women's role in Medicine during the Medieval Period.' you would only *need* to read Chapter 9 (IX).

It is also often beneficial to read the introduction, particularly if this is one of the first things you read on the topic, but for effective research you must stay focussed – **make a source work for you.**

CONTENS

You will of course need a bit more general information about medicine in the medieval period for your essay to allow you to write an introduction and place the rest of your text into context but this may or may not be the book to extract that general information from – assess your sources. **Again, this is where having a well-planned essay and research strategy will make your research effective because you should know exactly what you want from a source before even opening the page or clicking on a link. This applies to any kind of source you engage with.**

Here is another example. You are asked to write up a project on 'Major Colliery Disasters in the North East and their Impact on Local Villages'. You discover that the last major disaster was in 1951, within living memory. You ask your grandparents if they remember anything and although they don't, they know a couple of people who do and they would be happy to talk to you. This would be a fantastic opportunity for a researcher at any level, and for a school or college project, is sure to get you some marks for initiative and thoroughness.

Here comes the hard part! The people who are going to talk to you are giving up their free time to help you and of course, this may be a difficult subject for them despite it happening so long ago, so remember to ask for information in a sensitive way.

To make your meeting with them as efficient and effective as possible, and to extract the information you need, you would:

1. **Know what information is required for your project and what kind of information you think they will be able to provide – this will help you prepare questions before you meet them.**

2. **Record that information (getting permission if necessary).**

Of course, people aren't books! Sometimes people may talk about things that go a little beyond your remit and that's fine, you may actually learn some things you never thought to include, but try and politely keep the conversation on track so as not to take up more of their time as necessary.

Information from people who actually experienced a time, place or event can be invaluable and often the very best kind – refer back to our Using Sources guide to look at this more thoroughly.

Recording Information

You've planned your project, you've gathered together your books, articles, etc. and now you actually need to extract all of the information you need to write your essay or complete your project. It's very easy to read through a chapter of a book without thinking about how you're going to actually get selected pieces of information into your own work. Finding a way of recording information that you think is important for your work is essential and you need to decide the most effective method as early on as you can. Different methods work for different people so find what's right for you.
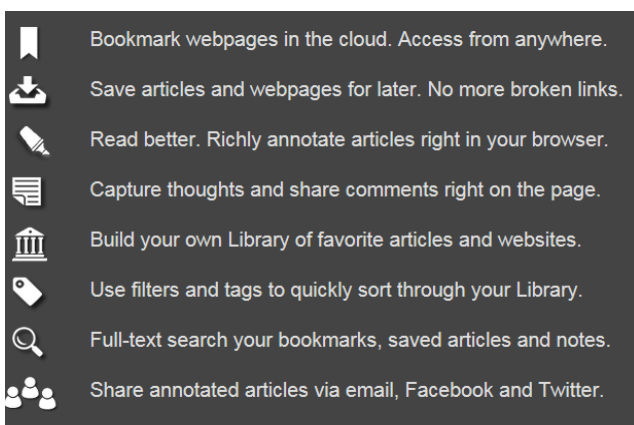
The most common method is of course to make notes – just remember you might end up making a lot of notes and then you will have to work through those again when you start writing, so find a way to organise them early on, perhaps based on chapters or sections of your essay that you think the information will eventually help to create.

Highlighting is another method that works for some. Remember, you don't necessarily have to recall this information for an exam, you will have all of the information in front of you as you write your essay so you just need to find a way that allows you to organise the information in the most effective way possible.

Online Tools:

If you are using sources from the internet such as web pages, online articles etc. then consider using an online tool to help you organise things. Tools such as Scrible are free at the basic level and allow you to do various tasks. These are listed on the screenshot image below.

Bookmark webpages in the cloud. Access from anywhere.

Save articles and webpages for later. No more broken links.

Read better. Richly annotate articles right in your browser.

Capture thoughts and share comments right on the page.

Build your own Library of favorite articles and websites.

Use filters and tags to quickly sort through your Library.

Full-text search your bookmarks, saved articles and notes.

Share annotated articles via email, Facebook and Twitter.

There are many other similar websites freely available to students online and some useful web address will be included on the final page of this document.

Finally, remember that the key to effective research can be summed up by 'the 5 Ps':

Perfect Planning Prevents Poor Performance.

"Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe."

— Abraham Lincoln

Further Resources:

Scrible: http://www.scrible.com/

Delicious, another online bookmarking service: https://delicious.com/

How to take better notes: http://www.wikihow.com/Take-Better-Notes

How to carry out research: http://www.wikihow.com/Conduct-Academic-Research

How to begin basic academic research: http://www.onlineuniversities.com/articles/students/how-to-begin-basic-academic-research/

University of Reading's advice on managing academic reading:
https://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/StudyResources/Reading/sta-academicreading.aspx

University of reading's advice on note-taking:
https://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/studyadvice/StudyResources/Reading/sta-effective.aspx

Advice on using Google for research: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/library/support/findinginfo/search-engines/

The Qualitative Research Guidelines Project's advice on interviewing: http://www.qualres.org/HomeInte-3595.html

Research interviewing guides:

- http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/intrview.php
- http://managementhelp.org/businessresearch/interviews.htm
- http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/center-for-refugee-and-disaster-response/publications_tools/publications/_pdf/pr_section_3.PDF