
Guide to Academic Library Research

Marygrove College Library

Interactive online version at:
<http://www.marygrove.edu/library/tutorial/research/>

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This is the print version of the **Guide to Academic Library Research**, which is available in an online interactive format at <http://www.marygrove.edu/library/tutorial/research/>.

For additional assistance and help documents related to library research, please see the Marygrove Library **Quick Reference Guides** page at <http://www.marygrove.edu/library/guides.asp>.

Feel free to contact a librarian at <http://www.marygrove.edu/library/ask.asp> if you need any additional information.

Introduction to the Research Process

This guide to the process approach to academic research can be applied to any library, any academic discipline, or any assignment. The process approach to research is intended to help you to:

- locate new information in a logical sequence.
- interpret new information and apply it most effectively in your writing.
- organize and use your time most efficiently.
- reduce your stress and increase your confidence as a researcher.

The 7-stage process outlined below is especially effective because it addresses the intellectual, practical and even emotional aspects of learning.

Stage 1: Getting Started

For the academic research assignment, this usually means selecting a general topic.

Stage 2: Exploration

The preliminary review of background and introductory information.

Stage 3: Focusing

Selection or development of a specific research topic or question.

Stage 4: Collecting Information

The sequenced search for general and then more specific sources.

Stage 5: Assessment

Evaluation of research; preliminary writing; more research as needed.

Stage 6: Presentation

Writing the paper, giving the oral report, etc.

Stage 7: Assessment

Thinking back on research strategy, methods, time management, etc.



Research Process Advantages

- Planning your research lets you “reinvest” the information you acquire in each succeeding stage of the process.
- You will **recognize useful information more quickly** and spend far less time handling materials that are not related to your focused topic.
- For a large project, spreading your research out over several weeks of reading and thinking will **help your understanding and control of new material** to develop naturally, and it will be **easier to organize and present your results**.

Stage 1: Getting Started

Academic research usually begins with an assignment. It is always important to clearly understand the requirements for the assignment. Take a look at your assignment and see which of the following questions you can answer right now:

- If the research product is a paper, is there a minimum length?
- If it's a presentation, is there a time limit?
- Is there a minimum number of sources you need to find?
- What are considered acceptable sources for the project?
- What is the due date?
- Which manual of style (APA, MLA, etc.) should be used for documentation purposes?
- Are there any other requirements?

Selecting a topic

As you begin your project, the topic you choose should be broad enough to let you discover new areas or angles that might help you focus as your research develops. When choosing a research topic, it is important that your topic is:

- Appropriate to the assignment.
- Personally interesting to you.
- Researchable, with enough information available on the subject to complete the assignment.

Sources for Selecting a Topic

If you get stuck trying to find an appropriate topic, there are many library sources you can turn to for help.



Local & National Newspapers

In print or online, newspapers can suggest topics for research in a wide variety of areas, and also have the advantage of covering current topics of interest. Some National newspapers you might try are the Christian Science Monitor and the New York Times.



Current Magazine & Journal Articles

Like newspapers, magazines typically cover current events topics. Some examples include Time, Newsweek, and US News & World Report. Scholarly & professional journals can also highlight subjects of interest or importance within specific disciplines.



Topical Anthologies

These collections of materials reprinted from other sources deal with different aspects of certain topics – like global warming, aging, terrorism, etc. Examples such as Opposing Viewpoints or Current Controversies can be found in the Marygrove Reference Room under the 080 call number.



Internet Sources

Try using Internet search engines like Yahoo! or Google to browse for topic ideas. But be careful: you can't trust everything you find on the Internet

Stage 2: Exploration

After you have a general topic in mind you can move on to the exploration stage, a combination of searching, browsing and brainstorming. At this point, the general and specialized reference sources and other “introductory” information available in the library will help you gain a better understanding of your general topic.

The exploration stage helps you to:

- **Develop** your broad topic into a more focused topic.
- **Detect** whether or not you are really interested in your topic and if there is enough research on it.
- **Discover** basic facts, concepts, sources and keywords related to the topic.

Sources for Exploration

Where do you begin? Talk to a reference librarian about your assignment, what you already know about your general topic, and why you’re interested in it. The librarian can introduce you to a variety of exploration tools and sources that will help you to develop a focused topic.



General Encyclopedias

These can be useful exploration sources, even though they are not usually cited (that is, quoted or referred to) in college level research writing. *The World Book* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* are examples of general encyclopedias.



Specialized or Subject Encyclopedias

Specialized or subject encyclopedias are extremely useful background sources. These types of sources - like the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* or the *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, for example - give more depth and detail than general encyclopedias. Ask a librarian for recommendations or suggestions.



“Introductory” sources

In addition to formal reference works, which are organized to give an overview of a subject, you may also find collections of materials reprinted from other sources. Examples like *Opposing Viewpoints* or *Current Controversies* can be found in the Marygrove Reference Room under the 080 call number.



Internet Sources

There are many very good introductory and background resources on the Internet. One example is Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org>), but as with other general encyclopedias, information from the Wikipedia should never be used as a source in your paper, just as a source for your information.

Evaluating Online Sources

It is extremely important that you always carefully and critically evaluate any information found through an Internet search engine. Unlike the information found in books or published periodicals, there are no editors or review boards to assure the quality of what you find on the Internet. Ask these questions each time you consider using information from the Internet:

What is the purpose of the website?

Look for tips in the graphics and text of the page:

- Does the URL (web address) give any clues?
- Is the page informative? entertaining? personal?
- Is it commercial (.com)? are they trying to sell something?
- Is it educational (.edu)?

Who is the author?

The most reliable websites will make it clear who provides the information, how they are qualified, and how they can be contacted.

- Is an author named?
- What are the author's credentials?
- Can you contact the author?
- Is there an organizational or corporate sponsor?

Is the information accurate, clearly presented, and up-to-date?

A page that is not currently or well maintained might negatively affect its quality and reliability.

- Are there errors in grammar or spelling?
- Are links and citations complete and accurate?
- Is the information organized, neat, and legible?
- Was the page recently updated?

Might the information be biased?

You should favor information that is as balanced and objective as possible. If the page contains advertising, consider that as a possible indication of bias.



Stage 3: Focusing

After you have completed the exploration of your general topic, it is time to come to a focused topic. A focused topic is the limited, specific concept or question that your research hopes to examine or answer. Your focused topic will eventually be refined into your thesis or research question, that is, the main idea which your paper or presentation will explain or argue. Having a strong, workable focus is essential to a successful research experience.

Focusing Technique

As your research continues, adjust your focus as needed. If you seem to be finding too much information, it is probably too broad; if you're finding too little, your topic may have become too narrow. In either case, feel free to talk it over with a librarian.

To help get to your focused topic, you might want to try a research-oriented focusing technique like the Focusing Grid. The Focusing Grid is one technique that can be used for focusing academic research projects. It is especially useful because it organizes ideas in the same ways libraries organize information.

The first 4 columns of the grid — geographical limits, time periods, populations or groups, disciplines/perspectives — represent the most typical ways in which information is organized in libraries, encyclopedias, and indexes.

In addition, many subjects have their own unique features which can also work as focusing elements. The 5th category of the grid—special concerns—is reserved for any special issues or ideas which do not fit into the other columns.

Subject: _____

Geographical limits	Time Periods	Populations or groups	Disciplines/ perspectives	Special concerns

Fill in the blank grid on the next page by answering the following questions:

Geographical limits

Which countries, states, regions, etc., were mentioned in your exploration readings? List as many as come to mind.

Time periods

Were any dates mentioned in your readings as important turning points?

Populations or groups

Which groups of people are involved with or affected by the subject you are researching (Women, men, children, the elderly, ethnic groups, etc.) ?

Disciplines or perspectives

What experts study and write about your research topic? (For example: sociologists, scientists, educators, etc.)

Special concerns

Is there anything else that seemed to be important but does not fit easily into the other four categories?

Example:

Subject: AIDS

Geographical Limits	Time periods	Populations or groups	Disciplines/ perspectives	Special concerns
<i>United States Africa</i>	<i>Present 1990's 1980's</i>	<i>Women Children</i>	<i>Economics Medical aspects Public policy</i>	<i>Sex education</i>

Next, select two or more concepts that seem most interesting or most promising in terms of availability of information, then link them grammatically in the form of a question to be answered or a statement to be tested. For example:

Africa + Present + Public health policy =

Are current public health policies in Africa succeeding in stemming the AIDS epidemic?

Your focused topic

Stage 4: Collecting Information

This stage is where you begin the sequenced search for information. This sequence of use makes sense for most projects and most academic disciplines, although there are always exceptions and variations.

- First, if you will be using books as sources in your research, it makes sense to locate them early since they may take longest to obtain and read.
- If your project will include popular magazines and newspapers, it makes sense to use the general periodical databases first since that information is usually shorter and easier to read.
- Next, you can move on to the scholarly journal literature after you are better prepared to search the specialized databases and to interpret and use the more sophisticated and authoritative articles.
- Finally, you might find other additional information, including government documents, videos and DVDs, interviews, websites, etc.

Age of Information

As you begin searching for and collecting resources for your research project, you will need to be very aware of the dates on the materials you find. In some disciplines, it is vital that you use only the most up-to-date materials, while others give you a little more leeway.

In general:

- For **scientific** subjects (biology, chemistry, medical topics), try not to go older than **5 years**.
- For the **social sciences** (education, social work, etc.), sources as old as **5 and 10 years** are typically acceptable.
- The **humanities** (history, art, music, etc.) are much less restrictive, but always favor more recent materials.

Finding Books

When available, information in book form is usually more **comprehensive**, more **detailed**, and more **in-depth** than information in other formats. Because books often contain so much more information, it is best to start your information collection with them.

- To find books in the Marygrove Library, use the library's online catalog. The **Marygrove Library Catalog** contains information on all of the books and other materials owned by the library.
- In addition to books available in the Marygrove Library, Marygrove students, faculty and staff have **borrowing privileges** at most Detroit-area and Michigan libraries.
- The Marygrove Library also has a large collection of **electronic books** (ebooks) available online through **Netlibrary**.



You can get started look for books on the Marygrove College website at <http://www.marygrove.edu/library/books.asp>

Finding Periodicals

After your search for books, it is time to turn to periodicals. Periodicals are **newspapers, magazines, journals** -- anything that is published periodically.

Periodical articles are valuable sources because they are:

- more likely to contain the **latest information** on a topic.
- more likely to discuss **newer subjects**.
- generally more **narrow** and **focused** in scope.

The most efficient way to find periodical articles in newspapers, magazines, and professional journals is by searching the online **databases** available through the library.



Periodical Databases

There are a wide variety of **general** and **subject-specific** databases you can use to find articles that appear in thousands of magazines and scholarly journals.

Because of the many different databases available, it is very important that you carefully choose those that best suit your needs. There are several **general interest databases** that you can use to find information on any topic. Two examples of general interest databases are:



ProQuest Curriculum Package



Academic OneFile.

You will have to more carefully choose from the many **subject-specific databases** available, but it is important to use these databases because they are where you are likely to find the most scholarly information. Feel free to ask a librarian for guidance.

You can see all of the databases available at the Marygrove Library at <http://www.marygrove.edu/library/articles.asp>, or view databases available by subject area at <http://www.marygrove.edu/library/subject.asp>

What is Scholarly?

It is important to distinguish between different types of periodical articles. Your assignment may require you to find professional "scholarly" or "peer-reviewed" journal articles. These are different from popular magazine or newspaper articles in several important ways.

Scholarly/Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles:

- Are intended for a professional audience in a particular field rather than for a general audience.
- Are usually written in technical, academic language by experts or professionals in a particular field, clearly noting the author's qualifications and professional affiliation.
- Are highly focused with a research-based, in-depth treatment of the subject matter.
- Are well documented with footnotes and/or references.
- Usually quite long (10 pages and up).

Popular Magazine & Newspaper Articles:

- Are intended for a general audience and appear in newspapers and general interest magazines.
- Usually do not go in-depth on the topic at hand and are broader in scope,
- Are usually written by writers who have no special qualifications in the subject area. The author's name may not be noted.
- Usually do not offer footnotes or references.
- Are normally not longer than 4-5 pages.

Locating Periodical Articles in the Library

Because not all periodical articles are available online in full-text format, it is sometimes necessary to go from the database to the printed article itself. The database provides information needed to locate the article. In addition to the author's name and the article title, the database record will give you the title of the periodical, the volume number, issue number, date, and page numbers.

Periodical Formats

Old issues of periodicals may be kept in a number of different physical formats, and libraries have different ways of organizing periodicals in their collections. Periodical formats in the Marygrove Library include:



Current Periodicals

These are typically available in their original paper format or in full-text online. Current issues of print periodicals are located in the Marygrove Library Reference Room in alphabetical order by title.



Bound Periodicals

Some older periodicals are stored as bound volumes. Bound volumes of periodicals are located in the Marygrove Library Reference Room in alphabetical order by title. Bound periodicals older than 10 years are located on the 4th floor of the library.



Microform

Though less common, some older periodicals are stored on microform (microfilm or microfiche). The Marygrove microform collection is available in the Library Reference Room, along with a reader/printer that allows you to print out the articles you find.

Because no library can have everything, libraries often share their materials through **interlibrary loan**. You can make an interlibrary loan request and have materials sent to the Marygrove Library, but it might be best to check with a librarian first to make sure you get the material you need as quickly as possible. See the Marygrove Library interlibrary loan page at <http://www.marygrove.edu/library/ILLservices.asp> for more information.

Stage 5: Assessment

Finishing your library research

Sometimes library research comes to an end when the researcher experiences a sense of closure or recognizes that nothing new is being discovered. More often, however, it is necessary to take a look at the information already collected and make a judgment as to whether it is sufficient for the purposes of the assignment or project.

One way to do this is to begin an outline of the projected paper, speech, etc. If it becomes apparent that there are gaps or weaknesses, talking to a librarian can help fill in the missing pieces.

Evaluating your sources

Since your bibliography—or works cited page—will most clearly indicate your accomplishments as a researcher, it is a good idea to carefully evaluate all of your sources.

A good bibliography will contain sources that are:

- **Relevant**, with all of your sources closely relating to your focused topic.
- **Authoritative**, with qualified authors from appropriate professional publications.
- **Up-to-date**, with the most recent information favored over older sources.
- **Varied**, with a balance between different types of materials (books, articles, internet, etc.).
- **Unbiased**, with an attempt to show multiple points of view and to minimize instances of social, political, religious or cultural bias.

Stage 6: Presentation

Presenting Your Results

This is the stage of the process where you complete the assignment. In the case of papers, this may include multiple drafts, proofreading, and everything that goes into polishing and perfecting the product of your research. The Marygrove Library provides some guides that might help you in this stage, including guides to creating a document in Microsoft Word and creating a presentation with PowerPoint.

These and other guides are available on the library website at

<http://www.marygrove.edu/library/guides.asp>.

At this stage, the library work is usually done. However, a researcher may occasionally find that some crucial bibliographic information is lacking, and a visit or call to the library becomes necessary.



Documentation

“Documentation” means the formal identification of the sources of information used in a research project. Different disciplines use different formats when presenting bibliographic information.

Some commonly used manuals of documentation are:

- The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 4th ed. is used mainly in the Liberal Arts and Humanities.
- The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5th ed. (APA), is used mainly in the Social Sciences.

Basic guides to each of these style manuals are available on the library website at

<http://www.marygrove.edu/library/guides.asp>.

Feel free to ask a librarian for assistance in documenting your sources accurately and correctly.

Stage 7: Reflection

Self-reflection, the practice or habit of being aware of your individual learning experiences, is an important element in adult education. This is especially true in independent learning situations such as research. As you look back over your project, ask yourself these three basic questions:

What went wrong?

- Problems focusing?
- Organizing your material?
- Time management?

What went right?

- Did the process work for you?
- Were you comfortable working with librarians?

What will you do differently next time???



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