



KNOX COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY

## Reference Department

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# Using the Library for a Research Paper

Research is investigation, an examination of a subject from different points of view.

Research is not just a quick web search; it's not even a trip to the library to "pick up something about" the subject. Research is a hunt for the truth. You come to know a subject by reading up on it, reflecting, challenging the ideas, choosing the areas that interest you and pursuing them with more study. Research is the way you educate yourself.

## Step 1: Understand your assignment and decide on your topic

Your teacher may assign your topic, or you might be given the opportunity to choose a subject that interests you. Start with a good understanding of what you are required to do for a good grade, because the reference librarian cannot interpret your assignment for you. If you wait until the last minute and then find out that you don't understand the requirements, it will be very sad for you!

## Step 2: Get background information

What is "background information?" It's reading up on the subject before you make too many decisions about how you're going to approach your research.

Why is background information important?

- It helps you to focus on names, dates, events, organizations, and words you'll use in your topic searches.
- It can help you decide whether to broaden or narrow your topic.

Encyclopedias are great for background information. You may choose to use a general encyclopedia, such as *World Book*, or an encyclopedia that specializes in your subject, such as *The Horse Encyclopedia*.

Find online encyclopedias and other reference books on [the website's Teens page](#), under **Homework Help**. The best sources for background information include *Gale eBooks*, *Oxford Reference*, *Salem Online*, and *World Book Online*, for encyclopedias across many subjects.

Want to know more about specialized encyclopedias? **Ask the reference librarian.**

## Step 3: Focus your search topic

If a topic is too broad, it is difficult to research efficiently. Also, it can be difficult to find material if the topic is too specific. Should you narrow your topic, or should you broaden it? Let the availability of sources (how easily you found publications in step 2) help you in defining your topic.

Think about different ways of looking at the topic and how you might want to cover them in your paper. There may be reference books and other information sources that can help you go in these directions.

## Step 4: Consider your resource options

### *What types of sources do you need for research?*

1. Primary sources are where new information first appears, such as first-person accounts (newspapers, diaries, interviews), original creative works (novels, plays, paintings), or data (census numbers, economic statistics, surveys, peer-reviewed research articles).
2. Secondary sources—such as encyclopedias and many magazine articles and books—analyze the information from primary sources. Our understanding of events, data, or creative works changes over time as secondary sources interpret the primary sources.

Sometimes a mix of primary and secondary sources is best.

### *What publication dates should you be looking for in your materials?*

Very current topics are more likely to be discussed in articles than in books.

### *What types of materials do you need?*

Your instructor might require you to find:

- Books
- Newspaper and magazine articles (periodicals)
- Websites
- Other materials, such as statistics, pictures, maps, and pamphlets

The resource you choose depends upon what you need for your argument. It may be harder to find an eyewitness account in a book, but easier in a newspaper. It may be hard to find specific data in articles, but easy to find it in reference books.

In addition to encyclopedias, reference books include:

- Directories. Are there organizations or groups who are associated with the topic? For instance, if you are researching animal rights, PETA—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals—is an organization for animal rights and would be a possible resource for a personal interview or pamphlets. A directory can help you find the most **reputable** organization and provide that organization’s telephone number, website, and email address.
- Handbooks, almanacs. Do you need statistics?
- Atlases. Do you want to see geographic aspects of your topic?

## Step 5: Use the appropriate tools to gather your materials

Books, videos, government documents: search the [library catalog](#).

Reference books and other types of online materials: see Step 2 above; find more resources using filters on the [Learning Resources](#) page. If your subject area isn’t in the filter, apply the [‘General’ filter](#).

Magazine articles: use online resources such as [Middle School or High School Gale in Context](#) to search for articles from the past 30 years or so; use print *indexes* such as *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* to find older articles.

(An index gives you a citation instead of the article itself; a **citation** is information about the published article so that you can find it.)

**Newspaper articles:** Use the newspapers databases to find your first primary resources. There are several databases, each covering different newspapers. Find the newspapers databases in the Learning Resources list; use the filter tag '[Newspapers](#).'

**Websites:** Some good sites are arranged with library databases and other research resources in the Learning Resources list; use the filter tag '[Selected websites](#).' A reference librarian might be able to suggest other websites that are better sites than you can find using Google.

**Other materials:** Look for statistics, pictures, maps, pamphlets, and other material that's off the beaten track; ask the reference librarian for suggestions.

As you research, it is important to keep track of all the sources and the searches you try. Write down, copy, or screenshot everything. Even if you don't find a source useful, at least you'll know you already tried it.

### *Asking a good reference question*

Ask a librarian for exactly what you'd like to find, and even explain what you're doing. For example, instead of asking, "Where are your books about education?" say "I'm writing an opinion paper about whether school uniforms should be required. I need data from schools that have tried it, and a little bit of the history of uniforms in schools."

Sometimes it can be difficult to think of the right words to use for computer searches. The librarian can help you brainstorm for related words, such as "dress codes." The librarian may also suggest that you try a broader search such as "[school discipline](#)" and then check in the index of those books for your more specific topic, school uniforms.

See contact information and some frequently asked questions on the [ask.knoxlib.org](http://ask.knoxlib.org) website. If you can't talk to a librarian in person, you can use that website to call, chat, text message, or submit a form.

### *Finding items using the catalog*

The library catalog lists all the locations in the Knox County Public Library System that have a copy of the item you've looked up. For electronic resources, it gives you the link. For physical items, it gives you the item's location. Ask the librarian to show you how to determine if a physical item is in the building you are using, and how to find its shelving location (or "call number"). If you start your research online before visiting the library, you can place holds to have the items waiting for you to pick up.

Remember that the catalog is not a search engine for page-by-page, word-for-word content of everything in the library. Catalog records only describe a resource at the broadest level, and sometimes at the level of the table of contents. Also, it is not a one-stop shop; you can find links into some of the electronic resources, but not all of them.

### *Using call numbers and locations*

Most school and public libraries use a system called Dewey Decimal call numbers. Books written about the same subject have similar call numbers, which groups them together on the shelf. That means it's easy for you to browse

the library's books on a specific topic. This arrangement by topic is more specific than the subject groupings in bookstores.

For example, the juvenile nonfiction book with the title Dorling Kindersley Animal Encyclopedia has the call number: 590.3 DORL. The 500 puts the book in the science section, and the 90 puts the book in the zoology part within science. The DORL part of the call number is to mark that book's specific location within all the other books with the 590.3 call number. But to really find the book, you also need to know that the location is J-Ref at Lawson McGhee Library, which means that it's a reference book in the Children's Room. That also means it stays in the library; it cannot be checked out.

**If you don't understand where to look for an item, ask the librarian.**

The juvenile section has some books appropriate for students in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades. In fact, often the best introductory books on difficult or broad subjects are juvenile books, and adults use them all the time. They're likely to also have great images such as maps, diagrams, and charts. Don't be embarrassed to look there—no one's too old to read good juvenile books.

### *Having materials sent to your nearest branch*

With your library card number and password, you can sign in to your account and place a hold on an item that is checked out, or on an item that you need from another location, or on an item that you want to pick up later.

## Step 6: Evaluate and organize your sources

Evaluating sources means looking at the information you gathered to decide what you can use. Reading through what you've found, you may find that the sources are not as helpful as you thought they would be.

- Is the information reliable? Was it written by an expert or authority on the subject? Be especially careful about websites. While you read, challenge each source in your own mind with the question "How do you know?" The best sources will tell you how they know, typically with evidence from previous research or data, showing you where that research or data was published so you can read it for yourself.
- Does the information answer your research question? It might be about your broad subject (step 1), but not have much to say about your topic focus (step 3).
- Is the information written for your grade level? Can you understand it? Does it have enough detail?
- Is the information from the right time period? You may need something up-to-date, or you may want something that was published close to the time an event happened.

As you read and take notes, keep track of which notes came out of your reading of each source so that you correctly *credit the ideas* and *support the facts* in your paper.

Think ahead about your bibliography, footnotes, etc. and the information you need to track for these citations as you write (for example, page numbers for each paraphrase or quote). Your teacher will tell you what style to use for citations. For most research papers, the *Harbrace College Handbook* may be useful. The librarian can help you, too.