

Using the Library for a Research Paper

Research is investigation, an examination of a subject from different points of view. It's not just 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.

What type of sources do you need? Sometimes a mix of primary and secondary sources is best.

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, experiments).
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—and re-interpret—the primary sources.

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, you'd better have your teacher's home telephone number!

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, terms, etc., associated with a topic.
- It can help you decide whether to broaden or narrow your topic.

Encyclopedias are good sources 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 *Encyclopedia of Crime and Justice*.

Find encyclopedias and other reference books on the website under **Explore the collection** → **Encyclopedias, magazines, and newspapers**. The **Databases** tab includes *World Book Online* because that resource is much more than just an online version of the print encyclopedia; it is several multimedia sites. You'll find other encyclopedias under the **Reference books** tab.

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

Step 3: Focus your search topic

It is difficult to do efficient research if the topic is not well defined, but it can be difficult to find material if it is too specific. Should you narrow your topic, or should you broaden it? Let the availability of sources help you in defining your topic. How much is available?

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 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, pamphlets

If you find a book or article in one of the Library's online reference databases, **these do not count as "websites"** even though you use the Internet to get access to them. In most cases they are online editions of books, periodicals or similar sources.

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.

The resource you choose depends upon what you're looking for. 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.

Reference books besides encyclopedias 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: use the online library catalog.

Magazine articles: use databases 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 database covers different newspapers. At Lawson McGhee Library, you can browse through topical files of clippings from local papers over the past several years. Similar files at the McClung Collection date back much further.

Find the newspaper and magazine databases on the website under **Explore the collection**. Of course, we have much more in the Lawson McGhee Library and McClung Collection.

Websites: Some good sites are arranged with library databases and other research resources in the subject guides on the library’s website. A reference librarian might be able to suggest other websites that are better sites than you can find using Google. Ask!

Other materials: Start with the subject guides on the library’s website. For statistics, pictures, maps, pamphlets, and more material that’s off the beaten track, ask the reference librarian.

Asking a good reference question

Ask a librarian at the Reference Desk 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 reference 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.

Finding items using the catalog

The online library catalog lists all the locations in the Knox County Public Library System that have a copy of the item you've looked up, and gives you the item's call number. In the "view details" page for a specific item, scroll down to the list of locations that have the item. Make sure the item is in the building you are using, and write down its call number and its location.

Remember that the catalog is not a search engine for page-by-page, word-for-word contents 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 databases, but the catalog is not a good substitute for using the databases themselves.

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.

If you don't understand where to look for an item, write down the title, call number, and location, then ask the librarian.

The Children's Room has some books appropriate for students in 7th and 8th 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.

Getting newspaper and magazine articles from the Periodicals Room

Write down the citation that you find in a printed index (such as *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*), or print out the citation from an online database. Give the citations to the staff; they will bring the publications out to you. You may request up to ten specific magazine issues at a time.

If your articles must be printed from microfilm, the staff will make the copies for you. The charge is 25 cents per page. You may request a total of three pages of copying while you wait, and more pages depending on whether other people are waiting for help.

Having materials sent to you

Holds: If you have a library card and PIN, you can log in to your library 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.

E-mail: Full-text articles from the library databases can be emailed to you.

Copies: Pages from up to three sources can be sent to a branch, FAXed, or mailed to you. Some limits and copy charges apply. Sometimes pages can be scanned and placed online for you to download.

Step 6: Evaluate and organize your sources

Evaluating sources means looking at the information to decide whether or not to use it. When you get down to 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 someone who is 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 by providing evidence from previous research or data and telling you where that research or data is published, so you can read it for yourself.
- Does the information actually 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 do your research, it is important that you keep track of all your sources; write down everything you might need in order to find your sources again on another trip to the library. 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.