

# RESEARCH, CITATION, AND PLAGIARISM

## Conducting Research

When presented with a research task for a college class or in any other situation, your initial goal may simply be to find the required type and number of sources for the assignment. However, the research process involves much more than this, and navigating it effectively will greatly enhance your learning experience and your success with assignments and projects. Below is a list of steps that you will want to follow to optimize the positive results of good research practices.

1. **Solidifying your topic:** This step may not always apply. Depending on your assigned task, you might, for example, be given a very specific, focused assignment that leaves little leeway for a topic adjustment on your part. Usually, however, you will either choose from a list of topics and/or narrow a topic to fit the scope of the project. Good writers know that the best papers arise from real interest and enthusiasm on the part of the writer; therefore, the more you look around and read up on your topic, the more likely you are to find an angle that you are enthusiastic about. So, the first step in research is exploring the topic to see where you, as an individual, fit with it.
2. **Planning your strategy:** Before you jump into finding the “right” sources to meet the requirements for a project, you should understand that an important element of researching a topic is planning your strategy. Students often make the mistake, for example, of choosing one or two broad search terms and then finding either way too many or non-specific sources. Your goal should be not just to meet the requirements, but to find the very best sources you can. The best way to do this is to make some important decisions:

**Which search terms are going to yield good sources?** This is often a trial-and-error process, but you will eliminate a good deal of error if you think about all of the points you plan to make in your assignment and all of the different ways of expressing your ideas. If you visit an online periodicals database and enter a search phrase such as “prison sentences,” for example, you are likely to get hundreds of hits. You need to ask yourself what you wish to say about the topic and what individual points you can make to support your idea. You might narrow a broad topic by adding specific terms such as, for example, “mothers,” or you might use two keywords together, such as “incarceration” and “childbirth.” If your first round of search terms does not satisfy your needs, try some others. See what keywords are used in the sources you have already found, or go to a thesaurus for synonyms and antonyms of your original search terms.

**Which databases and books should I focus on in my search for information, and how will I decide which sources to ultimately use in my assignment?** You can easily ignore some of the best sources if you don’t know where to look. For most research topics, you will want to use a general periodical database, such as Academic Search Elite. You will also want to perform a general book search. In addition to these venues, you must seek out the most likely places to find information

specific to your subject. For a paper on prisons, for example, you would want to be sure to search the ProQuest Criminal Justice database. In addition, you might find that government documents offer some good material. Finally, you should decide whether alternative kinds of sources—such as visual media or interviews—will be appropriate for the task at hand.

- 3. Evaluating your sources:** It is very important to understand that just because a source exists, it doesn't mean that it is a credible or reliable source. This is significant because your reader is only going to respect your work if your findings are backed by solid support. To determine which sources will garner respect for your paper and for you as a writer, see if the author or authoring organization is reputable. A credible author of a source might, for example, hold a Ph.D., be a long-time scholar in the field, or have lengthy or significant experience with the topic. You will want to stay away from texts that are designed to sell a product or personal websites on which anyone can say anything and pass it off as fact. You will also want to look at your sources for currency and bias. Remember that dated or biased sources are not worthless; in fact, these can be very effective in context. To contextualize a source, you might, for example, point out the publication date of an older source and discuss the significance of that, or illustrate the problems you see in the logic of a biased editorial.
- 4. Using your sources:** Once you have located what seem to be very good sources, you will need to decide which sources will best support your various points. Sometimes a direct quote will work best to illustrate your point, while in other cases you might paraphrase statistics to support a claim. Plan your source placement strategy as you plan your overall paper structure and content, and present your sources in a variety of ways. When you do actually draft your paper, it is important to integrate your sources smoothly into the text or else your sources will be more of a distraction than an asset. Use good signal phrases like "John Smith agrees; he asserts that..." or "On the other hand, statistics show...." Never leave a piece of researched information unanchored and not attached to any of your own words. A final consideration in the placement of sources in your paper is to follow each use of a source with a discussion of how the information is significant to your point or thesis. In other words, surround your source material with good lead-ins and follow-ups.
- 5. Documenting your sources:** Finally, it is necessary to document your sources properly. If you do not, you aren't following the rules of academic integrity and may, depending on the situation and the severity of the oversight, be downgraded, failed, or reported to a higher authority. The importance of proper documentation cannot be emphasized enough, and the general rule is that not knowing how is not an excuse. You are provided with the resources you will need to use sources fairly and are expected to adhere to those guidelines. Keep in mind that improper documentation is actually considered plagiarism; as a scholar, you are expected to display and promote academic integrity.

See also "Top Ten Mistakes in Academic Research," "Introduction to APA Citation," "Sample APA Citations," "Plagiarism: What it Is and How to Avoid it," "Kaplan University's Plagiarism Policy," "How to Paraphrase," "How to Summarize," and "When to Use Quotations."