

Researching Your Topic

FINDING SOURCES

Finding books and articles for your research can be quite a challenge - especially if you've not yet familiarized yourself with the library and its resources. The homepage of the UW Library homepages is a good place to start. There you will find links to the library catalog, electronic resources like online databases, and information on the library and its services.

If you're not sure where to start, try the following resources:

- **UW Library System** (www.lib.washington.edu): Services include 24/7 live help, circulation, helpful handouts, reference assistance, access to library computers, room reservations, interlibrary loan and copy/duplication of materials.
- **Student Consultations with Librarians** (www.lib.washington.edu/help/consult): The Student Consultation Service is designed for UW students needing research assistance with course- and degree-related projects and assignments. Meet with a librarian one-on-one to discuss focusing a topic, identifying & evaluating sources, and searching library databases and the Internet effectively. Subject librarians are on hand to provide you with even more specialized assistance.
- **Chat Online with a Librarian 24/7** (www.lib.washington.edu/services/qnalive)
Chat with a librarian 24/7 for all of your research need!
- **Odegaard Library Walk-in Workshops** (www.lib.washington.edu/ougl/walkins): Obtain helpful information on a variety of topics, including how to effectively research using a variety of online resources!
- **Research 101** (www.lib.washington.edu/uwill/research101): Research 101 is an interactive online tutorial for students wanting an introduction to research skills. The tutorial covers the basics, including how to select a topic and develop research questions, as well as how to select, search for, find, and evaluate information sources.
- **Writing Tutors:** Student peer tutors are another great resource. OWRC, or the Odegaard Writing & Research Center, is staffed Sunday through Thursday, 1:30-4:30 pm and 6:00-9:00 pm. OWRC tutors can give you support and guidance in research, feedback and instruction in writing. Visit the OWRC on the third floor of Odegaard Library or make an appointment online.
- **UW Faculty:** Finally, remember that UW faculty members can be an invaluable resource to you throughout your research process. To find an expert on your topic, check department homepages for information about individual faculty members.

USING YOUR SOURCES

You've found and read your sources. Now what do you do?

Summarize Your Sources

Before you attempt to use a source in your paper, you need to be sure that you understand it. The best way to make sure that you understand a source is to summarize it. In summarizing, you accomplish a few things.

- First, summarizing a source requires you to put this argument in your own language. Some of your sources might use language that puzzles you. When you summarize, you are in a sense translating an argument into language that you understand and can work with.
- Summarizing also enables you to see if there is any aspect of the argument that you *don't* understand. If you find yourself stumbling as you attempt to summarize, go back to the original source for clarity.
- Summarizing also allows you to restate an argument in terms that are relevant to your paper. Most texts that you encounter are very complex and offer several ideas for consideration. Some of these ideas will be relevant to your topic; others will not. When you summarize, you can restate that part of the argument that seems most relevant to the paper you want to write.
- Summarizing can help you in the organization process. If you've used ten sources in a research project, you've probably taken a lot of notes and have gathered several quotations for your paper. This can amount to pages and pages of text. Summaries can help you to organize these notes by telling you almost at a glance which idea comes from which source. You can also include in your summaries the two or three best quotations from each source.
- Finally, summarizing is helpful to the entire research process. It's not something that you should do once at the beginning of the research process and then forget about it. Every time your understanding of your topic shifts or evolves, take the time to write a brief summary. You'll find that putting what you think in writing helps you to solidify one stage of understanding before progressing to the next.

CATEGORIZE YOUR SOURCES

Once you've done a summary of your sources, see if you can place your sources into various categories. Remember: writing an academic essay is like taking part in a large, ongoing conversation. While everyone has his own point of view, it is also safe to say that no one is entering the conversation as a lone wolf. Everyone is speaking from a certain critical perspective. These perspectives might be classified into different groups.

Categorizing your sources might be as simple as looking for similarities among your sources. Which of these sources seem to share a point of view? Which seem to arrive at similar conclusions? You will also discover differences among your sources. Try to define these differences and see if they seem to fall into different categories: side A seems to believe X, while side B seems to believe Y. Or side A attempts to understand the problem from a feminist perspective, while side B is interested in rooting the problem in socio-economic terms, and side C is arguing that the problem doesn't even exist.

Once you've categorized your sources, try to understand what these differences and similarities mean to your argument. Are these categories relevant to the matter you intend to discuss? Where does your own argument fit in? Does the reader need to know about these categories in order for your argument to make sense? Try to articulate these matters clearly. Write a summary of what you think at this point.

INTERROGATE YOUR SOURCES

In most of the papers you will write in college, it will not be enough simply to review what other people have said about a topic. Instead, you will be asked to present your own point of view. In order to do this, you will need to interrogate your sources.

To interrogate your sources it is not necessary to be contentious. You don't have to search like a bloodhound for the weak spot in an argument. You are not required to "take on" your source.

Instead, you'll want to ask questions of your sources. Initiate a conversation. Challenge, interrogate, rebut, confirm.

- Is the writer offering evidence for her claims? Is this evidence sufficient? Why or why not?
- Is there something that the writer is overlooking? Omitting? Is this omission a matter of carelessness, or does it seem to you purposeful? Why?
- Does the writer's argument seem reasonable to you? If not, can you locate places where the reason seems to break down? Can you locate and identify any logical fallacies? Do these fallacies undermine the writer's argument, or not?
- Is the writer's language appropriate? Does she sometimes rely on a pretty phrase or a passionate claim to cover up a lack of evidence?
- What can you determine about the writer's perspective? Does she seem to have any biases that are important to note? Does she seem to belong to a particular critical school? Does the writer's perspective help or hinder the argument she is trying to make? Why?
- Where do you stand in relation to the writer? Do you give her a round of applause? Do you feel like booing her off the stage? Are you sitting with your arms crossed, feeling skeptical? Keep notes of your personal responses to the writer, and try to translate those responses into comments or questions.

MAKE YOUR SOURCES WORK FOR YOU

Beginning students often make one grave mistake when they write their first academic papers: overwhelmed by what their sources have to say, they permit their papers to crumble under the weight of scholarly opinion. They end up writing not an informed argument of their own, but a rehash of what has already been said on a topic. The paper might be informative. It might also be competently written. But it does not fulfill the requirements of a good academic paper.

We have said it before and we will say it again: a good academic paper must be analytical. It must be critical. It must be a well-crafted, persuasive, **informed argument**.

Consider the phrase "informed argument." The word with the power in this phrase is the noun, "argument." The word "informed" is merely a descriptor. It serves the noun, qualifying it, shading it. In the same way, the information that you have gathered should serve your argument. Make your sources work for *you*.

You can take some steps to ensure that your sources do indeed work for you without overwhelming your argument.

- First, don't go to the library before you've thought about your topic on your own. Certainly your research will have an impact on what you think. Sometimes you might even find that you reverse your opinion. But if you go to the library before you've given your topic some thought, you risk jumping on the bandwagon of the first persuasive argument you encounter.
- Second, limit your sources to those that are relevant to your topic. It's easy to get swept up in the broader scholarly conversation about your subject and to go off on tangents that don't, in the end, serve your argument.
- Finally, keep track of your evolving understanding of your topic by periodically stopping to summarize. As we said earlier, summarizing your sources makes them more manageable. If you manage your sources as you go along, you reduce the risk of their overwhelming you later.

KEEP TRACK OF YOUR SOURCES

It's very important when you are in the research process to keep track of your sources. Nothing is more frustrating than having a great quotation and not knowing where it came from. Develop a good, consistent system for keeping notes.

Every academic discipline requires that you submit with your paper a bibliography or list of works cited. A bibliography should include every work you looked at in your research, even if you didn't quote that source directly. A list of works cited, on the other hand, is just that - a list of works that you quoted, paraphrased, or alluded to when writing your paper.

Both bibliographies and works cited pages require that you provide information that will make it easier for your reader to find your source for herself. For example:

- If your source is a book, make note of the title, the author, the publisher, the date, and the city of publication.
- If your source is an article, make note of the title of the article, the author, the title, the series number, the volume number, and the date of the publication.
- If your source is a site on the Internet, make note of the author, the title of the document, the title of the complete work, the date of publication or last revision, the URL (in angle brackets), and the date that you accessed the site (in parentheses). (As the Internet is changing from day to day, you will want to check a current style manual for the most accurate citation methods).
- Sometimes you will be citing a lecture, video, film, radio program, or other less usual source. Consult a style manual to find out what information you will need to complete your bibliography or works cited page.

Always, ALWAYS keep track of the page number(s) of any information you intend to use in your paper.

CITE SOURCES CORRECTLY

When you write an academic paper, you must cite any and all sources you have used. For more information regarding how to cite correctly, please visit the "Writing Resources" page off the OWRC website at www.depts.washington.edu/owrc/