

Doing Research

Many college-level writing assignments will require you to do research. Planning out the steps you'll take in finding appropriate sources can make this process a lot easier. The guidelines below can help.

Research Concepts

Before you begin to look for information, make sure you have a grasp on your topic. This will help you define the specific area you are focusing on, so you don't waste your time later by researching extraneous material. Use the strategies below to nail down your focus...

The 5 Ws and How: these are the most basic questions you ask to be clear about your topic...

- Who, What, Why, Where, When, and How

The Classical Questions: Developed from philosophical inquiry, these questions help flesh out areas of your topic that you may need to consider in your research. Run your topic through each of these questions to get a better understanding.

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| What is it? | What class of events/concepts/ideas does it belong to? |
| What categories can it be divided into? | How is it like or unlike other events/concepts/ideas? |
| What caused it? | What did (does) it cause? |
| What process does it go through? | What general values does it show or deal with? |
| What examples exist of its influence? | What can be done about it? |
| What do others believe about it? | |

Background Sources

Once you've made your topic abundantly clear, you're reading to begin the research process. Background sources will provide you with support and additional information to back up your points. Possible background sources include but are not limited to...

- books
- articles from magazines, journals, and newspapers
- Internet sources, including websites, articles, and databases
- programs and film
- brochures and pamphlets
- speeches

Evaluating Sources

When researching, it is extremely important to evaluate the usefulness and credibility of your sources. A website, for instance, may or may not be helpful to you, depending on the reliability of the information and whether it is biased or unbiased. Correctly assessing sources and choosing for support only those that have the most credibility will, in turn, make your argument stronger. Use the following questions to evaluate each of your sources...

- What is the source, exactly?
- When was it published?
- Who wrote it? What is the author's relationship to the topic?
- Is the author knowledgeable? An expert in this field?
- What is the purpose of the source?
- How is the information presented? Is this a fair representation? Is there any bias evident?
- What is the intended audience of the source?

Observations

Observations are one kind of field research. Before setting up an observation, consider the points below.

- Decide exactly what you want to find out, and anticipate what you may see (a specific action? an action repeated? a sequence? interactions in a group? the number of times an action occurs?)
- Make sure your observation accurately relates to your topic.
- Develop a system of recording what you observe (a dual-entry notebook, for example)
- Make sure you are recording your observations in a non-biased fashion.

- Record date, time, and place.
- Be aware of the limitations of your observation.

Interviews

Interviews can be a valuable form of field research. When considering conducting an interview, keep the following ideas in mind...

- Determine the exact purpose of the interview.
- Determine the nature of the interview: will it be very structured, with a certain number of specific questions, or more of a conversational discussion?
- Set up the interview in advance (length of time, number and type of questions, appointment time and place, permission to record).
- Prepare a list of both convergent and open-ended questions.
- Record time, place, and date.
- Thank the interviewee, and send a follow-up note or email.

Surveys and Questionnaires

A survey, questionnaire, or poll can provide relevant information about local opinion. However, it is important that such field research be conducted correctly in order for the results to carry weight. Use the guidelines below when preparing a survey (or questionnaire)...

- Write out your purpose for conducting the survey, and make sure that it's related to your topic.
- Decide on the format for the survey (multiple choice, number ranking, yes/no, free response, etc.).
- Brainstorm a list of questions, making sure that each is relevant and unbiased.
- Draft question that call for a short, specific answer.
- Determine who it is you will be surveying, and how location and time of day may affect your results.
- Test the questions on a group and revise those that are ambiguous or hard to answer.
- Leave space on the questionnaire for answers.
- Be sure not to distort the results of your survey by "setting up" desired results (for example, a survey that attempts to determine general student attitude toward the Greek system may be biased if you only survey fraternity or sorority members).

Experiments

Conducting an experiment requires careful planning and preparation. Here are some pointers to remember...

- What is it that you're trying to demonstrate? Make sure your purpose is clear.
- If your experiment involves people, be sure you have their permission to participate.
- Document each step of the experiment.
- Be careful not to influence the outcome of the experiment.
- Reporting on the experiment in a formal style may be necessary. The UWC's lab report section can help with this.

Personal Experience

Your own personal experience can be an effective form of evidence in an essay. Relating your history in regards to the topic establishes your credibility by showing that you have personal knowledge in this area. Explaining your own connection to the topic also creates an emotional and ethical bond with the reader--as a writer, you are seen as both human and earnest in speaking about the issue. When considering using personal experience as support in an essay, be sure that your connection to the topic is both clear and relevant. If you can't clearly state your personal link, than you probably shouldn't use this form of evidence. Be sure to give the full context of your experience as well,so the reader understands how your specific case relates to the general idea.