

## Historical Research

**Part I: Develop a specific research proposal.** (Specificity is antidote for many headaches later in the process).

### **1. Finding a Topic (Broad background reading):**

- a. One must find a topic of interest. If you do not have a topic of interest then you will not desire to keep working on it. If you begin reading about a topic and lose interest then move on to another topic.
- b. One must specify the topic. Topics like, “The Cold War,” or even “The Soviet Military during the Cold War” are far too broad. There are thousands of sources that cover those topics. You must narrow it down by doing background reading. One must learn the basics about the topic and get an overview of the general idea. When learning about the Soviet Military one may come across several interesting ideas. For example, Khrushchev began to institute a high school military training program to prepare young men for military careers. This may be a topic that sparks interest and leads one to say, “I want to learn more about this high school military program in Russia.”
- c. With a specific topic in mind one can begin focused or specific background reading. What is the sentence that caught your attention?

### **2. Finding a research question (Specific background reading):**

- a. Once one finds that sentence of interest, one must begin to find a way to ask a specific question. Simply asking, “What was the high school military program like?” is not a question that leads to very good research. **It does not give the paper direction.** Without direction the paper will never get written. There will only be vague ideas thrown on a page.
- b. A few ideas on how to specify a question:
  1. One may begin to question the sources or conventional wisdom. *“Some sources often exclaim that Galileo was a good scientist being persecuted by religious institution bent on censoring science. Did the Church really want to hold scientific progress back?”*
  2. One may want to complicate an issue. *“Even though economic instability brought to light problems with the Soviet government, to what extent did American media smuggled into the Soviet Union present doubts about that government to the Soviet people?”*
- c. Remember that unfounded assumptions can lead to very limited research. *“Why were the German soldiers under Hitler so much more susceptible to blindly following orders than American soldiers?”* How do you know that they were?
- d. The answer to your question must fit into the limits of the assignment. For example, a 5-page paper must be more narrow than a 10-page paper.
- e. A question must also be truly researchable. A question that can be answered with a google search is not a research question.
  1. “In what year did Isaac Newton publish *Principia*?”
  2. “Which delegates did not sign the U.S. Constitution at the convention in 1787?”  
*However, this last question can be something that sparks a more interesting research question, like “How did the arguments used by those who would not support the new constitution reflect a segment of American society, and why was did this segment exist?”*
- f. One must then think about how one will evaluate / measure this
  1. In the example above, how would one measure the amount of “reflection” of the particular segment of society.
  2. Another example for evaluation, in the question *“How did the propaganda used by NASA during the Mercury missions create a society more willing to support space exploration?”* The researcher would be taken with finding a way to evaluate/measure the change in “willingness” of the American society to support NASA’s mission rather than just tell about the types of propaganda used.

*(Tip: When using a book for broad background reading, place a note on a piece of paper in the book where you have a question. If the question is not answered directly, or if the answer to your question is a bit lacking, then you have a decent topic.)*

***Part II: Developing a thesis statement. (The Thesis is the specific answer to the research question. Although, at this stage it might be called a hypothesis because it will need to be tested and supported with factual information.)***

**3. Answer the most important question: “Why is this important?” (Why should someone care?)**

- a. The reason, “because its interesting” is not enough. One must find how this event plays a part or is significant in a larger narrative of history.
- b. For example, “*College football changed during World War II because colleges began to incorporate military training programs.*” may be interesting, but it is not good history because it does not answer the most important question.
- c. However, the statement “*During World War II, the U.S. military used the college football field as a training ground to instill the discipline and leadership skills necessary for successful military officers.*” tells the reader that they are not just reading the paper to get an understanding of how football changed during World War II, but it also explains that the change over time was significant in the larger story of the U.S. military during the War.

**4. Forming a good thesis: (some may want to call it a hypothesis at this stage).**

- a. One begins by answering the question that was created in step 3.
- b. Next, find any vague phrasing that may need to be defined or clarified in order to more accurately understand the question or answer.
  1. For example, in the question “*Even though economic instability brought to light problems with the Soviet government, to what extent did American media smuggled into the Soviet Union present doubts about the government to the Soviet people?*” What type(s) of media are we referencing? What problems are we referencing, and are they the same issues that led the Soviet people doubt their government’s stability? Are we dealing with any particular time period? Do we have solid evidence that the Soviets (1) had and watched black market American media, and (2) that they doubted their government’s stability?
  2. As one begins to clarify these things, one naturally begins to form a hypothesis, which in turn can be tested.
- c. Testing the hypothesis means that we are beginning to fit historical evidence into the argument. In other words, we are doing real research.
- d. The next step will be to “tweak” the thesis so that it fits all aspects of the information found in the research (see the next step).

### **Part III: The actual research**

#### **5. Research: (from hypothesis to thesis)**

##### **Researching in the Information Age**

One problem that faces a student of the “information age” is the overload of information available. It used to be much more difficult to locate secondary and primary sources for research. Today, many primary sources are translated, scanned, placed online, and easily accessible. Secondary sources are no longer found in a card catalog but rather through online stores and nationwide library searches. This significantly limits the work of finding sources, but it also can create so much information that student researchers become overwhelmed. This is why step 2 is so important.

One should begin by finding the secondary sources available. If one searches for book on their topic and finds hundreds of books then the topic is too broad and must be narrowed. *For example, a quick search on Harvard Library's HOLLIS Catalog for “Galileo” returned over 1,700 sources, while a search for “Galileo AND the Jesuits” returned 9; “Galileo and the Pope” returned 13. Of course this is only one index and does not include scholarly journal articles. If there are too many sources then go back to step 2 and keep narrowing.*

##### **Books**

One can further narrow down the sources by only dealing with those sources that are scholarly. Begin by asking the simple question “Who is the intended audience?” If you can tell by the style of the book that the author was writing for those no higher than 6th grade then, while the book may give a nice overview, there will not be much detail. If the book was designed to be a “coffee table book,” then, again, the detail will be lacking. However, if the book contains a strong bibliography indicating good academic research, or, better yet, the book has footnotes or endnotes, then one can be assured that the author has done a lot of research and is presenting the research for scrutiny. These are signs of good academic and scholarly work. One may also check publication information. Books published by well-know academic presses or university presses tend to have higher academic standards. Also, when was the book published? Older does not mean better. A book published in 1935 about the Civil War will have a different perspective than one published in 1965 or 2005. All of them are going to have some bias based on the society at the time they were written, and more recent publications have the advantage of using a previous book as a starting off point. They may get more in depth in a particular argument by presenting more evidence, or the historian may present evidence that challenges the previous historian's thesis.

However, this new technological approach (i.e. internet only catalog search) is lacking something very significant from the “old school.” Do not rely solely on database searches and online catalogs. We all tend to miss things. Go to the section in the library where your sources are located. Look around the shelves. You will find many sources that did not appear in your search because you were using key words that may not appear in the title. This may lead you to even more searches using different key words.

Remember, you are not limited to just your school library. You also have access to public libraries, you librarian can often get a book on loan from another library. Also, a nearby university library may be rich in sources.

Finally, you are not reading every page of every book ever written on a topic. You are limiting the books by specifying your topic. Further still, one need not read the entire book, but rather look at the table of contents, the index, and the preface/introduction. When one finds a book that has value for one's particular research topic, then one may use the book more throughly. However, only certain parts of the book will be relevant.

## Journal articles

There are numerous historical journals published that contain papers written by historians on specific topics. Journal articles are just as valuable as books, if not more valuable for a researcher because they deal with very specific topics. In fact, many books by historians began as a journal article and then expanded. There is a difference between a journal article and a magazine article. Journals are often scholarly/peer reviewed and are generally more academic.

There are several ways to find Journal articles. Here are a few:

**Ebscohost** - Magazine and Journal articles - accessed through Galileo

**Proquest** - Magazine and Journal articles - accessed through Galileo

**Questia** - 75,000 full-text books, and 5 million articles online - accessed through a questia account login given out by the IB program at Douglas County.

**JSTOR** - a database of scholarly journals - only accessible through with password and login. (University Libraries often have this available, but one would have to be at the school).

## Primary Sources

Do not rely solely on secondary sources. The most rewarding investigations involve primary sources.

True research must take into account primary sources. A good project will have numerous primary sources. Of course, primary sources are limited as one researches farther back in the timeline. The lack of English translations for some topics are also a limiting factor in primary sources. This should be taken into consideration when choosing a topic.

There are numerous types of primary sources, from diaries to newspapers, to pictures, to letters, etc... Here are a few examples and where to find them.

**The Digital Library of Georgia** - Maps, photos, other primary sources - accessed through Galileo

**Georgia Government Publications** - accessed through Galileo

**Other State Government publications** - through their government web pages.

**U.S. National Archives** - some things are online

**Newspapers** - some are online, others are on microfilm at various libraries.

**Internet History Sourcebook** - by Fordham University

**Museums and presidential libraries** have a lot of good things, you may need to call and ask if they can help.

## 6. Formulating a Thesis

As you test the hypothesis through the accumulation of more and more source material/evidence, you begin to tweak your hypothesis so that it forms a strong argument. Ask questions like, "Is my thesis really correct?" "Is there any piece of evidence (especially primary source) that puts my thesis into question?" "How can I tweak/alter my thesis so that it is accurate and provable?" The answer to your research question is your thesis. The rest of the paper involves you proving that your thesis is correct.

Your argument should be unique.

If in the course of your research you find the exact answer to your question, then you must adjust your research to be truly yours. For example, if you are asking "*How did the Medici of Florence become powerful and why did it not last?*" and you come across the book by Christopher Hibbert titled *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall*, then you have a problem. Your question has apparently been answered. If your entire paper can be summarized with "*For a better (or more in depth) explanation see Christopher Hibbert's book.*" then you are not presenting a unique argument and you do not have a research paper. All you have is a book report. You may, however, challenge Hibbert's argument, or take a stance against one particular assumption made. After all, he wrote a book on the topic, you are writing a much smaller paper and need a much more specific topic. (Guess it's back to step 2 again).

Developing a good thesis is a very difficult process. It takes time. It takes work. There is no answer that you will come across. The thesis is your unique argument, born from your own knowledge, analysis, synthesis, and development after digging into source material.

## Part IV: Putting the project together - this can only be accomplished after good research.

### 7. Writing the Paper

#### Organization

How will you organize your thoughts so that the argument you make is clear and precise. One should state their conclusion from the outset. In other words, present the thesis. Then, one must arrange the evidence so that the audience easily follows the case being made. The evidence is clear; the conclusions are well laid out.

#### Analysis

Each and every piece of information used in a research paper or essay should be specifically designed to help further the arguments being presented.

**Over the course of research one will learn a lot of interesting facts. The key to distinguish between *interesting* facts and *important* ones. If something is interesting alone, it should be left out. If something is important it should be used and its importance should be clearly and succinctly given.**

#### Style

The style of the paper should match the proper academic tone of the subject. For example, History papers are written in past tense, while literature papers are written in present tense. Thus, in a history paper an author *said* something; however, in a literature paper, the author *is saying* something. History is also written in active voice. It is important to follow the rules and be consistent.

#### Citation: A final note

Citations for history papers should be Chicago Style, also called Turabian style. The *Chicago Manual of Style* can be accessed online. It will show how to cite things in footnotes/endnotes and bibliography (works cited).<sup>1</sup> So, make sure you know where every piece of information used in your project came from. Remember inadvertent plagiarism is still plagiarism.

Other citation styles are used in other academic areas. For example MLA is used for paper in Literature; APA is used for some Social Sciences.

Style guides for all types of sources can be found online for each of the guides. For example, one can find the proper citation for a book with one author, book with two authors, an online article, a webpage, the Bible, and many virtually any other source.

Style guides are for more than just footnotes/endnotes and the bibliography; they also show the proper way to put headings on a paper, the margins, etc... While most of these aspects is the same across style guides, there are some notable differences that, if done incorrectly, would make one's paper stand out in bad way.

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<sup>1</sup> Footnotes come at the foot of a page and are designated with small superscript numbers such as the one to the left of this note that corresponds to the number in the text above. Footnotes should not be used for clarification purposes (as I am doing here). They should be used to cite the source and tell the reader from where the information came and can be found. Additionally, the footnotes increase in number throughout the paper. One does not use the same number over and over again to reference a particular source.

End notes are just like footnotes except rather than appearing at the end of the page, they appear all together at the end of the paper. The superscript numbers follow the same rules as above.

A Bibliography/Works Cited page is not the same as endnotes. A Bibliography/Works Cited page is an alphabetical listing of all sources used in the paper. Sometimes, sources are broken into different types of sources (e.g. Primary and Secondary) and then listed alphabetically (this depends on the project and the citation guide). Sometimes, as a requirement for a specific project, an annotated bibliography is included. This type of bibliography explains the values and limitations of each source.

