Research Paper Instruction

"Work from a plan, but be ready to depart from it, even to discard it for a new one."
Kate Turabian

Step 1: Pick a topic

- **Start Big**
- **Begin to narrow it down (make it manageable)**
- **Be prepared to change topics, so START EARLY**
- **Pick something that *you* are interested in**

Step 2: Begin to ask guiding questions?

- **What is it about this topic that you are interested in finding out?**

The elevator story (A way to conceptualize your project)

1. **I am working on X**
2. **Because I want to find out Y**
3. **So that I can help others understand Z**

- **Why is it important?**
- **Why should we care?**

Example:

I am working on Alexander of Macedon

Because I want to find out what made him "Great"

So that I can help my reader understand how myths, legends, and historians can shape how future generations view historical figures

Example:

I am working on the Salem Witch Trials

Because I want to find out why some women were accused while others were not

So that I can help my reader understand how specific societies viewed traditional gender roles and religion

Five general goals you should try to attain:

1. **Ask a question that is interesting and worth finding the answer to.**
2. **Find an answer that you can support with good reasons.**
3. **Find reliable evidence to support your reasons.**
4. **Draft a report that makes a good case for your answer.**
5. ***Revise that draft until readers will think you met the first four goals.**

Difference Between a Simple Question and a Critical Question

Simple Question: Can be answered with a yes/no response; contains the answers within themselves; can only be answered with a fact or series of facts

Ex. Did southerners attempt to limit African-American rights by prohibiting them from voting?

Critical Questions: Leads to further questions and discussion; derives from a careful and critical reading of the text

Ex. After Reconstruction, many former slaves received rights that did not exist prior to the Civil War. These rights included voting, citizenship, and due process. In what ways do these rights represent freedom and in what ways were these rights limited? How do these rights represent freedom as understood by white Americans during this period? In what ways do these rights represent Congress's priorities regarding the former slaves, considering the limitations of these rights?

Example of a guiding question:

Why are some historical figures "Great" while others are not? Additionally, why are the "Great" historical figures primarily men?

Why were some women accused while others were not? What beliefs existed in 17th century America to make an entire society believe in witches? Was this a strictly religious reaction or was there some other reasons why this occurred?

Step 3: Begin to read about the topic

- -Make it Manageable!!!!
  - What is it about your topic that interests you?
  - Is there a specific aspect that is more interesting than others?
  - Is there something about your topic that puzzles you?

- Begin with secondary sources (The Library)
  - Primary vs. Secondary???
- Table of Contents and Index
- Sub-headings
- Titles of the source
- Read the introduction and conclusion
- Bibliographies for other sources

How to Read a Secondary Source

Read the title. Define every word in the title; look up any unknown words. Think about what the title promises for the book. Look at the table of contents. This is your "menu" for the book. What can you tell about its contents and structure from the TOC?

Read a book from the outside in. Read the foreword and introduction (if an article, read the first paragraph or two). Read the conclusion or epilogue if there is one (if an article, read the last one or two paragraphs). After all this, ask yourself what the author's thesis might be. How has the argument been structured?

Read chapters from the outside in. Quickly read the first and last paragraph of each chapter. After doing this and taking the step outlined above, you should have a good idea of the book's major themes and arguments.

Read through the chapters actively, taking cues as to which paragraphs are most important from their topic sentences. (Good topic sentences tell you what the paragraph is about.) Not every sentence and paragraph is as important as every other. It is up to you to judge, based on what you know so far about the book's themes and arguments. If you can, highlight passages that seem to be especially relevant.

Take notes: Many students attempt to take comprehensive notes on the content of a book or article. I suggest that you record your *thoughts about the reading rather* than simply the *details and contents of the reader. What surprised you? What seemed particularly insightful? What seems suspect? What reinforces or counters points made in other readings?* This kind of note taking will keep your reading active, and actually will help you remember the contents of the piece better than otherwise.

Look at the bibliography and notes (citations)

-The bib will provide you with other secondary sources that you may want to investigate

-It will also point you towards some primary sources.

-The citations will tell you what types of evidence the author used and what sources are available.

Step 4: Look for Primary sources

Look at what other historians have used

<u>You do not have to reinvent the wheel!</u>

Step 5: Propose some working hypothesis

- **Speculate**
- **Doesn't matter if they're wrong or not**
- **Doesn't matter if you have no evidence**
- **Be prepared to change your argument!!!!**
  - **This could occur after you discover something new (VERY EXCITING!!!)**

Examples:

Alexander of Macedon is considered "Great" because Roman historians labeled him great.

Alexander of Macedon is considered "Great" because of his actions when he was alive.

Alexander of Macedon is considered "Great" because of what occurred after his death.

Examples:

Religion was so ingrained in 17th century Americans that it was perfectly reasonable to believe in witchcraft.

The women who were often accused of witchcraft did not fit the traditional gender roles during this period.

Do not be hesitant to ask for help!!

Use the resources you have available to you (myself, librarians, other professors, classmates, friends, family members, the internet, even Wikipedia but NOT as a source etc.)

Other helpful hints:
Keep good notes
Storyboards
Index cards
Don't freak out when you start to panic. We all panic!
Most important: WRITE!

"Writing is a good way to think more clearly about your reading, but it's also a good way to think more clearly about your thinking."
Kate Turabian