

## Research 1 — The Research Process

Research papers give writers an opportunity to formulate our own ideas and to demonstrate how these ideas relate to a larger conversation. They are an exciting but also a complex and sometimes overwhelming endeavor, especially given the vast amount of information literally at our fingertips today. One of our favorite guides to writing research papers, Kate Turabian's *Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, has a whole section called "Managing Moments of Normal Panic," which just goes to show that feeling overwhelmed by research is both common and manageable. Taking your research papers one step at a time, following a purposeful research process, will go a long way toward making your work more productive and your paper more effective.

### Defining a Research Question

So, you have been assigned a research paper — where do you start? Whether your professor assigned you a topic or you've chosen one yourself, you'll want to begin by defining a research question. Start by mining for questions around the topic at large. If you're interested in the titles of artworks, for example, you might ask yourself about the implications or consequences of titles, leading to a question like: How do the titles of artworks impact viewers' interpretations of the work?

### Preliminary Research

You may already have a potential answer to this question, but now you'll want to explore your question further by reading widely on your topic. You might start with Google, but you'll want to visit the library and search for books and in online databases of scholarly articles as well. Bibliographies of one book will often lead you to another. Likewise, once you've found a helpful book, look around it on adjacent library shelves; books are often arranged thematically, suggesting unexpected new sources. Remember too that reference librarians are always there to help expand your routes of inquiry. As you dive into numerous sources, read critically to discern various arguments and examples around your topic. Take careful notes and consider creating an annotated bibliography that keeps the main points of each of your sources at the forefront.

### Forming a Working Hypothesis

Returning to your topic — how artworks' titles impact interpretation — consider all the points of view you have discovered in your research. Maybe one of your sources argued that titles dictate a single meaning, but you're starting to think they open up new possibilities for meaning. Disagreement is good! Contradictory opinions help define your point of view through counterpoint. Maybe one of your sources made an argument very similar to the one you hoped to make — that's okay, too. Take it as an opportunity to fine tune your argument to say something slightly different or to say it in a new way, and use that source as supporting evidence for your point of view.

### Refine Your Sources

So you have a working hypothesis: artworks' titles expand the interpretive possibilities of the art itself. Now you'll want to refine and deepen your research to find specific supporting evidence. Your sources will include not only critics' and historians' perspectives on the topic, but those of artists. You might also collect primary source information—titles of artworks that exemplify your argument. Transcribe quotes that say something in specific or powerful language; summarize or paraphrase general arguments, and remember to make citation notes for all source material along the way, so you don't have to retrace your steps later. Continually review your progress, refining your hypothesis as you build your evidence. Thorough research will often lead you to new questions, and, finally to a working thesis (see our handout on the thesis statement).

## Primary and Secondary Sources

A source is any information of record that plays a role in a scholar's work. It can come in many forms: print, online, encyclopedia, dictionary, interviews, media, indexes, images, movies, etc. There are two general types of sources: primary and secondary.

**Primary sources** are factual, uninterpreted data. For example: audio recordings of speeches, a painting, field notes, interviews, statistics, basic information such as a brief biography. When interpreting findings from primary sources it's important not to overgeneralize results based off too few observations, to recognize that correlation does not equal causation (just because two things happened, one didn't cause the other); and to consider other factors beyond the primary source.

**Secondary sources** are other people's interpretations of facts or data. For example, a claim made by another writer on a topic you are addressing or a general concept — a term, theory, or approach — that has appeared in discussions on your topic.

## Online Sources

As convenient and seemingly endless as online sources are, they can be unreliable and incomplete. Printed materials remain the most reliable and extensive sources, and writers should generally use websites to supplement other resources. When assessing the reliability of Internet research, it's good practice to prioritize sites that feature scans of reliable print materials (such as JStor), that list their sources, that are updated and yet stable (vs. open to public erasure or change), and to crosscheck information with printed sources.

## Library Links

RISD's Fleet Library:	<a href="http://www.risdlibrary.edu">www.risdlibrary.edu</a>
Brown University Library:	<a href="http://www.library.brown.edu">www.library.brown.edu</a>
Athenaeum Library:	<a href="http://www.providenceathenaeum.org">www.providenceathenaeum.org</a>
URI's Helin Library:	<a href="http://www.library.uri.edu">www.library.uri.edu</a>

## Online Research/Bibliography Management Tools

[www.easybib.com](http://www.easybib.com)

[www.zotero.org](http://www.zotero.org)

## A Few of Our Favorite Online Primary Sources

[www.ubuweb.com](http://www.ubuweb.com)

An archive of 20th-century avant-garde work including poetry readings, experimental performances, audio, video, and readings.

[www.pbs.org/art21](http://www.pbs.org/art21)

Interviews with contemporary artists, with each program organized around a theme.

[www.greatbuildings.com](http://www.greatbuildings.com)

Pictures and information about more than 1,000 examples of world architecture.