

# How to Start and Conduct Research for a Research Paper

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v. 2.0, August 24, 2009

Almost all interesting papers begin with a question or puzzle: *What caused what?* The paper then answers this initial question. (example: Q.: *Why did the U.S. not ratify the CTBT?* A: *Bureaucratic politics and institutional structures*). All evidence should make this argument and address/acknowledge counterarguments. See my "How to Make a Theoretically Informed Argument" handout for more on this.

So what to do now?

You can simply hit the web and hope for the best. If you spend enough time, you may well do well. However, this is actually not efficient, or scholarly. I have seen many students do poorly this way. Most of my worst paper grades are due to two things: horrible writing and/or web-only research. Perhaps web-only research is a symptom of doing things at the last minute...

## How to Conduct Research

Here are some hints on how to conduct research. Adjust this advice if your topic is very current events-oriented or very historical.

However, mistakes are often made in assuming that history sheds little light on a current event.

Go to the library. Do a search under books of your keywords (<http://catalog.library.nd.edu>). Note the specific call numbers, and note where the general clusters of call numbers are. Be creative in your searches so you rake in every area you should (history of the area, international relations of the area, security studies of the area, economics of the area, etc). Go to these clusters (JX, D, U, etc.). Start thumbing books and bound volumes of journals. Thanks to the precision of your question/topic you know precisely what to look for. Or, thanks to research, you can refine your question/topic so you know what to look for. Most research is iterative: start broad, end specific. Learn a lot. Have fun in the stacks. This may work for finding good journals too, but fewer items come in in hard copy.

Here is where the efficiency really sets in: Use footnotes from books and articles to build up a research "**get list**." For example, if you wanted to research some aspect of the beginning of the Cold War, you could use some of the sources cited in some of your readings. These sources would themselves list more sources...and the chase is on. As noted, once you look up a few sources, you will notice that they cluster around certain areas of the library (JX1400s or D800s, for example). Going to those areas and thumbing through books is a highly efficient way of finding sources that are A. well written and B. relevant to your topic.

With any index, computerized or not, be creative when thinking up key words and subjects.

Don't ignore older books and journals. Even if your topic seems very current, analogous situations have probably occurred before. You may find relevant arguments about your topic in places you did not suspect. A good "get list" will likely extend backwards anyway.

There are a very large number of databases, indexes, search engines, etc. All this can be quite daunting. BUT YOU MUST PERSEVERE. Not just for this class but for your career here and beyond. Further, the process of building a get list as described above often obviates the need for advanced searches (unless you are doing cutting-edge work and must be sure you are on top of all aspects of your subject).

Please take advantage of the research librarians. You pay them to help you. Not only that, do the bowling shoe and imagine why they think they are there. They live to help you, they live for your questions! There is an "Ask-A-Librarian" program through which you can phone, text, chat, email, etc. a librarian. <http://asklib.nd.edu/> I prefer an old fashioned person to person talk myself.

<https://www.library.nd.edu/instruction/forms/consultation/> or just walk up to the reference desk. Presto!

Have fun in the library. Along with great cities, art, and architecture, they are one of the highest achievements of civilization

**Credits:** This has been prepared with the help of Scott VanJacob and Jean McManus, librarians at the University of Notre Dame. (I followed my own advice and asked them for help).

NOTE: as libraries are one of the highest achievements of civilization, then WRITING IN LIBRARY BOOKS IS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY.

**Useful Websites:** Some useful websites to help you get the most out of the Notre Dame Library, and your research more generally:

- The library's guide to its own services: <http://library.nd.edu/services/>
- The library's guides on how to do research; some are more useful than others:
  - <http://www.library.nd.edu/fys/>
  - <http://www.library.nd.edu/research-tools/>
  - <http://www.library.nd.edu/course-pages/>
- A thoughtful guide on how to start and execute research, applicable to almost any subject:  
<http://www.polisci.ucla.edu/faculty/trachtenberg/guide/guidehome.html>
- Here are the library's electronic resources gateways, in increasing order of specificity: <http://www.library.nd.edu/subjects>
- [http://www.library.nd.edu/subjects/political\\_science](http://www.library.nd.edu/subjects/political_science) (also ones for peace studies, history, etc.)

Gateways lead to directly to relevant journals, journal articles, databases, indexes, and so forth. Some good ones for my classes include but are far from limited to: PAIS, JSTOR, CIAO, journals with titles beginning with "International..." etc.. As always, hitting the stacks is often more efficient and precise in the long run. Some key journals are not offered electronically, and some databases are purposefully kept a few years out of date to keep folks subscribing to the journals they index.



