



## Researching: The Basics

The strategies in this guide will help anyone who needs to research a topic regardless if its in person (library, archive, museum, etc.) or with online research.

### 1. Where to Start

#### Define your Topic

*If you can set your own research question:*

- Make sure you have a genuine interest in the topic
- What is already known about the topic?
- Is there enough literature available on this topic?
- Can you identify your aims and objectives clearly and concisely?

*If you have been assigned to answer a specific question(s):*

In 3 Steps:

- Analyse it – make sure you understand the language and terms being used, including the context. If you are unsure – ask!
- Think about it – what do you already know? How would you go about researching it? What is the argument/requirement? What are the different ways I could answer the question(s)?
- Stick it up – using a sticky note, keep the question(s) within your line of sight wherever you study. That way you'll be more likely to stay on track and not deviate from the original research question(s).

To help with any task, try a few note-taking methods such as brainstorming, mind mapping and making lists. Together they can make it easier to understand the context of your topic, what you already know, what you need to know and where to go next.

For more information and to find activities to help you in this area, go to:

<http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-finding-and-evaluating-information>

### 2. Knowing What Types of Sources Available

There are two main types of sources available to you: Primary and Secondary. Both types can be found in libraries, archives, online, but more importantly they are all around us!

#### Primary Source:

Is a document or physical object which was written/created during the time under study. These sources were present during an experience or time period & offer an inside view of a particular event.

Examples include:

- **Original Documents:** Diaries, Speeches, Manuscripts, Letters, Interviews, News Film Footage, Autobiographies, Official Records

All of this information and more can be found on the Skills@Library website: <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills>  
Skills@Library is a free, online source for skills development provided by the University of Leeds



- **Creative Works:** Poetry, Drama, Novels, Music, Art
- **Relics or Artifacts:** Pottery, Furniture, Clothing, Buildings

## Secondary Source:

Interprets and analyses primary sources. These are 1+ steps removed from the event. They may have quotes, pictures or graphics of the primary sources in them. Examples include:

- **Publications:** textbooks, magazine articles, histories, commentaries, encyclopedias

## 3. Finding Literature

Once you understand your topic/research question and brainstorm what types of sources might be available to you, then you need to:

### 1. Clarify any unknown information and definitions

Use dictionaries for definitions; glossaries for specialised terms and encyclopedias for an overview

### 2. Identify the main concepts or elements of your topic

Use single words or key phrases  
Use related words, e.g. broad/narrower terms; synonyms

### 3. Make a list of the relevant keywords & concepts

*Example:* The impact of computers and the internet on higher education learning

**Concepts:** computers, internet, learning, higher education

**Keywords:** computers, information technology; internet www; learning, acquiring knowledge; higher education HE, university, college

When coming up with keywords remember to include abbreviations, foreign spellings (as applicable), and terminology used within your subject field. Textbooks, Google (especially Google Scholar) and similar resources can give you a broad overview of the field, thus providing you with important keywords and concepts to add to your list.

Click on the link below for a useful activity on choosing what to read from Skills@Library:

<http://library.leeds.ac.uk/tutorials/activities/reading/selecting-texts/>

## 4. Boolean search

This is a technique that helps to widen or narrow searches in all search engines, from online search engines such as Google Scholar to online databases and Library catalogues.

There are three basic 'commands' you would use in your search field/box:

**AND:** use to combine your different concepts. This will narrow your search

**For example:** 'higher education' will yield millions of results, but using 'internet AND learning' will significantly narrow your search



**OR:** use to combine your alternative keywords. This will broaden your search

**For example: not all sources will use the exact same word in their work, so searching using 'higher education OR HE OR university' will bring up these additional keywords for higher education**

**NOT:** to exclude words. It will narrow your search, but use with caution as you may accidentally exclude useful material

**For example: if you search for 'orange' in a database/online you will come up with a variety of uses of the word, for example: the colour, the fruit and the UK mobile company. By adding NOT you can differentiate between these meanings.**

You can also combine all three or use a combination of these search commands to narrow your search. To do this: in some search tools you have to add brackets to keywords that you combine with OR, however, for other search tools such as Google Scholar (advanced search) you just add your keywords into the ready-made Boolean search template.

Try using several different combinations of concepts and keywords in your search so you can cover a larger breadth of information. Also, write down which combinations you have used, because you may need to find particular sources again when writing up and referencing.

## 5. Evaluating your Sources

When you are searching for sources, there are 5 key areas to consider, especially when you are looking at sources online:

**Authority** – aka The Author: are they an expert?; are they cited by others?; work for a particular organisation?; is it sponsored (so biased or presents one point of view)?

**Objectivity** - Is the perspective clear?; is there hidden bias? What is the purpose of the information?

**Timeliness** - Is it clear when it's been produced?; is it up to date or been superseded? (especially important for websites and other online sources; make sure there's a date for the site and content)

**Supporting Evidence** - Have they provided any?; if so, is it of a good standard? (such as literature by academics and/or experts in that field); are they referenced so you can have a look yourself?

**Relevance** - Is it at the right level?; is the emphasis appropriate?; is it relevant in relation to your work?

Clicking on the link below will lead to an interactive tutorial on evaluating sources:

<http://library.leeds.ac.uk/tutorials/evaluating/>



## 6. Reading Strategies

Once you've found all your sources, there are four basic methods for reading the literature that you find:

**Predicting:** guessing what a text is about from the title. This can be used, for example, when finding other, potentially related, books in the same section of the library. If you find some useful titles, then move to the next method: scanning.

**Scanning:** looking through a text for a specific piece of information. This can be useful, for example, when first finding a book and searching its index or contents page to see if any of your keywords/concepts are in there. Then to see if the book is worth: skimming or reading intensively.

**Skimming:** reading very quickly to pick up on the main ideas of a text. You do not have to actively read every paragraph and/or section of every text. Instead, try reading the first 2 sentences of every paragraph and/or read only sections of chapter(s) with your keywords and concepts. This could be a quick way to get the overall context of your subject and/or to find out if the literature is really worth reading. If it is, then move to the final step: reading intensively.

**Reading intensively:** reading in detail to fully understand the argument of a text. This is time consuming, but critical for your analysis and comprehension of the information. It will be these texts/sections of a text which will form the foundations of your argument(s)/project. Therefore you will need to take extensive notes.

## 7. Note-taking

There are many different ways of taking notes, which is why its important to find a style or mix of styles that works best for you. Some of the more common methods of note-taking include:

**Brainstorming or Mind-mapping, Making Lists, Using Sticky-Notes, Using Bullet points for Key Information, Colour Coding what you Write...**and the list goes on.

Need help understanding complex texts, how to read more efficiently or take more effective notes?

Have a look at these resources from Skills@Library:

- Reading with Understanding e-workshop: <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/tutorials/activities/reading/workshop/>
- Critical Thinking: <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-critical-thinking>
- Note Taking: <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-note-taking>
- Paraphrasing and Summarising: <http://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-summarising>