Choosing a Research Topic

Start EARLY.
Choosing and researching a topic are iterative processes. Give yourself plenty of time to refine or redefine your topic.

Read the assignment carefully.
Are you choosing a topic for a two page paper or a twenty page paper? Are you being asked to present both sides of an issue or to take a position? Will you be presenting pure research or sharing your personal reflections?

Brainstorm ideas.
Have any of the class lectures or readings particularly interested you? Can ideas from others courses be integrated here? Is there anything in your personal experience you’d like to explore? Did you enroll in this class hoping to learn something specific?
Identify your interests and passions.

You might be working on this topic for an entire semester. Choose something that you’re curious or excited about.

Find general background information on a broad SUBJECT.

See what aspects of this subject are being written about. Do any of these incorporate your interests/passions?

For example, find general information on the broad SUBJECT – AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY.

Some ways to do this:

- Use ENCORE to search St. Lawrence University Libraries’ holdings.

- Refine your search to include only sources found in the Reference Area and peruse encyclopedias, dictionaries, almanacs...that specifically cover African American History. Identify topics that interest you.

- Use TAGS to refine your search.
• Use a multi-disciplinary index such as Academic Search Complete to find journal articles on your SUBJECT.

• Browse the titles and abstracts of articles written on your SUBJECT.

• Similar to ENCORE Tags, subject headings on the left hand side of the screen tell you more specifically what these articles are about.

• Follow the same process in Google Scholar (www.scholar.google.com).
Turn your SUBJECT into a more specific TOPIC.
Choose an aspect of the broad SUBJECT that you’re interested in exploring. TOPICS that are too narrow or too broad are difficult to research.

For example, after doing preliminary research you determine that your TOPIC will be THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND THE BLACK CHURCH IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY.

Identify keywords, specialized vocabulary, and synonyms for later research.
Keep track of terms for keyword searching. Determine how these need to be combined to find the best information.

The computer doesn’t “understand” synonyms or other relationships among words. Be sure to search all keywords that apply.

For example – Search:
BLACK OR “AFRICAN AMERICAN” OR NEGRO AND CHURCH OR RELIGION OR CHRISTIANITY

Research and read more about your TOPIC.
Use the keywords you’ve identified to find information on your TOPIC. Can you find enough information on the TOPIC, or do you need to modify it? (This is where the “iterative process” comes in).

Turn your TOPIC into a THESIS STATEMENT.
Formulate one or two sentences that state precisely what you will be informing your audience about. What will you prove or answer?

For example, after doing more in-depth research you determine that your THESIS STATEMENT will be – Religion and the Black Church played a very significant role in the political activism and Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s.
Scholarly vs. Popular Sources

Scholarly Sources:

- Articles are published in JOURNALS
- Authors are experts in a field, provide credentials
- Contain original research or analysis of original research
- Purpose is to share knowledge
- Written in scholarly or technical language for professors, scholars
- Are PEER REVIEWED – evaluated and approved by experts in a field
- Contain extensive footnotes and/or bibliographies
- Are generally longer than MAGAZINE articles

Popular Sources:

- Articles are published in MAGAZINES
- Authors are journalists or professional writers, not subject experts; sometimes no author cited
- Contain general interest stories or opinions
- Purpose is to entertain, inform (news)
- Written in non-technical, easily understood language for the general public
- Are NOT PEER REVIEWED
- Do not contain footnotes or bibliographies
- Are generally shorter than JOURNAL articles
• All of the disciplines taught at St. Lawrence are displayed on the library homepage.

• Click on General Sources to find some recommended indexes.

• There’s no one, single “right” index. Use a combination of indexes to do comprehensive research.

• Academic Search Complete is an excellent multidisciplinary index.
Use an asterisk to search for all keywords with the root s-l-a-v-e

Use quotation marks to search for an exact phrase

Use the **Source Types** filter on the left of the results screen to return only magazine articles

The FULL TEXT of many articles is available online.

- HTML Full Text – words only, prints quickly.
- PDF Full Text – words, graphics, and charts are included; might take a while to download and print.
• Use the **Source Types** filter on the right of the results screen to return only magazine articles.

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**Finding Popular Sources - Google Books has Magazines!**


• Use the **Advanced Search in Google Books** to find full text magazine articles.
Alternative Sources

Alt-Press Watch:
- “an alternative to corporate controlled, mainstream media coverage”
- “showcases independent voices from grassroots newspapers, magazines and journals”

Ethic NewsWatch:
- “often overlooked perspectives of the ethnic and minority press”
- “covers the most important issues concerning ethnicities and minorities in the U.S. and Canada”

GenderWatch:
- “provides authoritative historical and current perspectives on the evolution of gender roles as they affect both men and women”
Finding Scholarly Sources – Academic Search Complete

- Click on Choose Databases to search several indexes simultaneously

- Choose Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals to weed out Magazines from your results.

References


- Use the bibliography at the end of each article to find more sources.
• Use the **Date Range** in JSTOR to find materials dating back to the 1600’s

• JSTOR is almost completely FULL TEXT
Finding Internet Sources – Google

- Do an Advanced Search in Google to limit your results by domain.

Finding Internet Sources - Ipl2 – “Information you can Trust”

Ipl2.org

- Ipl2.org provides access to “authoritative, high-quality, trustworthy” websites
Evaluating Web Pages

Authority

- Who wrote the page?
  
  Look for the author's name, a copyright credit (©), contact information or link to an organization.
  
  Look for biographical information or the author's affiliations (university department, organization, corporate title, etc.). Can these be verified?
  
  Has the author published books or journal articles?

- Whose web site is this?
  
  Look at the domain (.com, .edu, .org, .gov etc.).
  
  Look for an "about this site" link.
  
  Be careful of a web page that has a tilde (~) in the URL, as this usually identifies a personal directory on a web site.

Currency

- Is the information up-to-date?
  
  Is there a date at the top or bottom of the page?
  
  Don’t confuse currency of content with last update of the page.
  
  Compare the information on the web page to information available through other sources.
  
  Broken links are one measure of an out-of-date page.

Objectivity

- Is the author being objective or biased?
  
  Biased information is not necessarily "bad", but take the bias into account when interpreting or using the information given.
  
  Are the facts accurately and completely cited?
  
  Is the author fair, balanced, and moderate in his/her views, or is the author overly emotional or extreme?
Thanks for attending!
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