

# Research Strategies

*Note: This document should only be used as a reference and should not replace assignment guidelines.*

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Research means exploring the facts, ideas, and arguments surrounding a topic. Once you learn what others are saying, you can enter the academic conversation and support your own arguments. This handout explains the steps you can take to prepare for, gather, evaluate, and organize your sources.

## Prepare

Before you even begin research, there are certain steps and decisions to make that will set the foundation for your success. The more you prepare, the more you will discover.

- **Choosing Your Topic:** (See also our handout on *Prewriting*.) Your topic should be something you're passionate enough about to spend a lot of time reading and thinking about. What are your interests? What current events do you have a strong opinion about? Is there something you've read about, or experienced yourself, that you want to learn more about? Your topic shouldn't be too wide (i.e. the whole history of America) or you'll have too much to cover and not enough room to address everything; instead, you should be as specific as possible. A topic may be too narrow if you can't find enough sources to address it, in which case you can broaden your topic. Keep in mind that the topic shouldn't be too difficult to understand, but should be complex enough to keep you interested. Remember to stay flexible—follow your research wherever it (and your interests) take you.

Note: The library website ([uvu.edu/library](http://uvu.edu/library)) provides topic ideas and research guides to help you get started.

- **Gaining Background Knowledge:** If you're not familiar with your topic (or even if you are), it might be helpful to read through a relevant encyclopedia entry. While encyclopedias, like Wikipedia, only provide general knowledge, they often refer to other sources you can explore.
- **Research Questions:** Once you decide your topic, form a question to guide your research. What do you want to find out? Try to move past simple yes or no questions. A question about whether homelessness is a problem in your city may conclude your research quickly, while questions about causes of homelessness, the economic effects, or solutions to homelessness have more potential. Even if you already have an answer in mind, come up with questions you'll need to answer to support your opinion. Remember to keep an open mind, since you may find that your initial answer will become more nuanced or even reverse completely based on the evidence you discover.

## Find

### Type of Sources

- **Determine Your Purpose/Genre:** What's your purpose in writing your paper—to persuade? To inform? How in-depth will your argument need to be? What types of sources you use depends on your purpose and audience.
- **Books** are great sources of in-depth knowledge. However, because of their length, it may be a good idea to focus on just one chapter that most pertains to your topic.
- Peer-reviewed **academic articles** are the bread and butter of scholarly papers. "Peer reviewed" means the work was reviewed by scholars in the field before publication. They are usually more credible, informed, and detailed than informal sources. UVU's library provides students access to thousands of academic articles (discussed in the next section). You can also use Google Scholar, but be aware that some articles require payment to view them.
- **Magazines and Newspapers** are not considered scholarly because they often are written for public interest. However, they can contribute useful information and are usually easier to read than academic articles. Newspapers, in particular, are helpful when researching local or current issues. If you use this type of source, make sure to evaluate whether it is credible and well-supported.

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- **Informal or general sources** (like blogs, YouTube videos, or Wikipedia) may give you a better understanding of your topic or lead you to more academic sources, but you should exercise caution when citing them in your paper.
- Some professors may allow or even encourage you to use **primary sources**. Examples of primary sources include a first-hand account of a historical event, a personal interview or survey you conducted, or a piece of art that you're analyzing.
- **Personal experiences** often inform a writer's research. First-hand experiences can hook your reader and increase your credibility. However, since personal experience provides only one perspective, it should not be your only evidence.
- Keep in mind that you don't necessarily need to agree with all the sources you use. Some you may argue against in your paper; all will inform your understanding of the issue.

## UVU Library Database

UVU's OneSearch is the gateway to thousands of academic articles and other sources. As a UVU student, this is your best resource for doing research. To search, type keywords related to your topic; remember to include major concepts, synonyms, broader topics, and narrower topics. You can narrow your results by date, source type, etc. You can also click on the "DATABASES" button to view a list of all databases, including some specialized ones not used in OneSearch. This can help narrow your search results by field and topic.

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**Abstracts:** Most articles provide abstracts or descriptions that summarize their contents. After reading the abstract, you can decide if the source seems useful enough to spend time reading the whole thing.

## Interlibrary Loan

Sometimes, during the course of your research, you'll come across an amazing source that the library can't provide the full text of.. Using interlibrary loan, you can request for the library to borrow material from another library. This could include articles, books, scanned copies of book chapters, and more. This service widely expands the amount of material you can use for sources. However, because it can take a few days for articles to arrive and sometimes longer than a week for books, you should make sure to request any needed materials well before your assignment deadline.

## Reference Librarians

For help at any point in the research process, you can visit the reference desk on the library's first floor. You can also work with subject-specific librarians.

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## Evaluate

### The CRAAP Test

Not all sources are created equal. The CRAAP test (which stands for Currency, Relevance, Accuracy, Authority, Purpose) is a series of questions to help you determine the quality of any source.

- **Currency:** When was the source published? Sources more than ten years old may be outdated. Finding recent sources is especially important for scientific research.
- **Relevance:** Does the source directly address your topic, or only mention it in passing? The less you have to bend a source to fit your topic, the better.
- **Accuracy:** Is the article peer-reviewed and supported by evidence? Are references documented, reputable, and verifiable? Does the information match what you already know about the topic?
- **Authority:** Is the article written by an expert in the field, or just a blogger with an opinion? How professional is the website?
- **Purpose:** What is the author's goal—to inform, entertain, or persuade? Sources written with an agenda may distort or sensationalize information. Try to determine the author's bias and intended audience and how it impacts their argument.

## Organize

Organizing your research, an oft-overlooked step, means being able to find your sources when you need them. Nothing is worse than having done hours of research and not being able to find the one piece of information you need. Organizational strategies could be as simple as saving articles to a designated folder on your computer or emailing permalinks to yourself, or as complex as setting up a system of notecards or writing an annotated bibliography for yourself. Some writers prefer printing sources to have a hard copy. Find what works for you.

Once you have your sources organized, you can write down what questions arise as you study, as well as the answers to those questions. Mark the most important information as you read each source and start making connections between sources. This will set the foundation for beginning your own paper.