Getting Started Early

Research Strategies

Once you have understood the assignment expectations, your next step is to select a topic, conduct your research, and explore possible ideas. Research strategies, then, are not simply the skills you develop by locating information in the library. They involve strategically identifying your topic and developing that topic through library research and your own ideas.

1. Selecting a topic

For some assignments, finding a suitable topic requires a little thinking on your part. If, for example, an instructor asks you to summarize an article in a professional journal, you know what you will write about – the article in question. But suppose you are given a list of general questions or even one question. For instance, you are asked to analyze a feature of popular culture in terms of its impact on society. You won’t be sure of a specific writing topic until you explore the possibilities. Keep the following points in mind when you conduct your topic search:

- Meet the requirements of the assignment
- Be focused in scope
- Seem reasonable (that is, be within your means to research)
- Choose an area that sincerely interests you

A. Limit the Subject Area

Many of your writing assignments may relate to general subject areas that you are currently studying. Your task, then, is to select a specific topic related to the general area of study – a topic focused enough that you can treat it with some depth in the length allowed for the assignment. The following examples show the difference between general subjects and limited topics:
B. Explore for possible topics
Finding this focused topic may, however, require a little work. Here are a few strategies that may help you narrow your focus, and produce a main idea or topic around which you can develop your essay. These strategies work best if you have engaged with the course material to some degree. For instance, you should attend lectures and try to do as much of the course readings as you can. However, at this stage, you don’t necessarily need to go to the library; you’re just trying to refine your existing ideas.

I. **State your topic as a question:** A good way to focus your ideas is by stating your topic as a question. For example, if you are interested in finding out about alternative energy sources, you could ask yourself, “what sorts of energy sources are available beyond fossil fuels?” Identify the main concepts or keywords in your question and then elaborate. Solar power might be an option, but in Canada, it would not be a viable choice. Wind power might be a better option.

II. **Freewriting:** Freewriting is the writing you do without having a specific outcome in mind. You simply write down whatever pops into your head as you explore your topic. Follow your thoughts instead of trying to direct them. Don’t stop to judge, edit, or correct your writing; that process will come later. Keep writing even when you think you’ve exhausted all your ideas. Switch to another angle or voice, but keep writing. Watch for a promising writing idea to emerge. You will learn to recognize the beginnings of a good idea, and then expand that idea by recording as many specific details as possible. Once your ideas are on the page, review your writing and underline the ideas you like. These ideas will often serve as the basis of your future writing. Also, consider reading the freewriting of others; learn from your peers.

Freewriting can serve as a starting point for your writing, or it can be combined with any of the other prewriting strategies to help you select, explore, focus, or organize your writing. If you get stuck at any point during the composition process, you can return to freewriting as a way of generating new ideas. Writing is thinking, so use this exercise and others like it to think through your ideas, slowly and carefully. These ideas will most likely become the basis of your paper. You will find that freewriting helps you develop and organize your thoughts. Although it may be awkward at times, try to stick with it.
III. **Listing:** Another way to explore possible topics is to list freely whatever comes to mind, beginning with a key concept related to the assignment. The following is an example of a student’s list of ideas for possible topics of the subject of news reporting:

*Aspect of popular culture: News reporting*

*Sensationalism*
*Sound bites rather than in-depth analysis*
*Focus on the negative*
*Shock radio*
*Shouting matches rather than debates*
*Bias*
*Contradictory health news confusing to readers*
*Little focus on “unappealing” issues like poverty*
*Celebration of celebrity*

IV. **Clustering:** To begin the clustering process, write a key word or phrase related to the assignment in the centre of your paper, then cluster ideas around it. Record each idea, and draw a line connecting it to the closest related idea. Keep going until you run out of ideas and connections.

```
players’ salaries
↑
gambling ← *Professional sports* → role models

| ← funding questions
v
damage ← *Cult of winning* ← *Sports* ← *College sports* → recruiting abuses

| effects on
cost on children’s sport

↑
focus on male players

lack of support ← *Women’s sports* → recent advances

↓
changing perception of women
```

After about four or five minutes of clustering, scan your work for an idea to explore in free writing.

V. **Identify main concepts or keywords** in your question. In this case, they are professional sports, college sports, and the cult of winning. These main ideas will potentially become the centre of your paper, and the surrounding ideas might be points within that paper, so don’t dismiss your ideas. Also, by
developing these ideas on your own, you will not exclusively depend on the research to do the thinking for you. Try to have some sense of what you want to write about before engaging in research. There is always an element of back-and-forth: the research will help you generate ideas, and you will bring your own thinking to your research. Just make sure that there is an organic process of developing your ideas; don’t merely depend on someone else’s thinking on the subject to do the work for you.

C. Test your topic
When you have chosen a topic, test whether adequate information exists to support your topic by researching main concepts or keywords in a variety of ways.

I. Check the primary text to see if it sufficiently engages with the issue.

II. Check your class notes and handouts for ideas related to the assignment.

III. Search the Internet. Type in the keyword or phrase and see what you can find.

IV. Discuss the assignment with your instructor or an information specialist.

V. Use the keywords as search terms in indexes, guides, and other library references. The University of Toronto Library catalogue is an essential resource.
   - If you are finding too much information and too many sources, narrow your topic. You can do this by using the “and” operator: “wind power and fossil fuels.”
   - Finding too little information may indicate that you need to broaden your topic. For example, look for information on “fuels,” rather than “fossil fuels.”

D. When identifying possible sources . . .
Finding meaningful sources is one of the most important steps you will take as you prepare to write. Listed below are tips that will help you identify good sources.

I. Give yourself enough time. Finding good sources of information may be time-consuming. Books and periodicals may be checked out, your computer service may be down, and so on.

II. Be aware of the limits of your resources. Print material may be out-of-date. Online information may be more current, but it may not always be reliable.

III. Use your existing resources to find additional sources of information. Pay attention to books, articles, and individuals mentioned in reliable initial sources of information. You will find these other sources in footnotes and Works Cited pages.
IV. **Ask for help.** The specialists at Robarts library can help you find information that is relevant and reliable. You can find these specialists on the fourth floor at the resources desk.

V. **Bookmark useful Web sites.** Include reference works and academic resources related to your topic.

2. **Carry out your research**

A. **Explore different sources of information**

There are various types of information that you may require. Of course, books and Web sites are not the only possible sources of information.

   I. **Background sources:** Encyclopedias, dictionaries, other reference works, and Web sites all provide overviews of topics, people, places, events. The Web is a good source for background information, especially on businesses and organizations of all kinds.

   II. **In-depth information:** Books, government reports, and articles in magazines or scholarly journals provide examinations of topics in-depth. Key library resources for in-depth research include e-books, full-text articles, and online journals.

   III. **Facts and data:** Facts, data, and statistics are published in encyclopedias, almanacs, handbooks, government publications, and in articles. This type of information is also widely available on the Web.

   IV. **News, Opinion, Multimedia:** Find news stories and opinion (editorials, commentary or reviews) in newspapers, popular magazines, and on Web sites. The Web is especially good for keeping up with breaking news and finding alternative viewpoints. Multimedia sources include images, animations, video, and sounds.

B. **Try to use reliable sources**

You can begin evaluating a physical information source (a book or an article, for instance) even before you have the physical item in hand. Appraise a source by first examining the bibliographic citation. The bibliographic citation is the written description of a book, journal article, essay, or some other published material that appears in a catalog or index. Bibliographic citations characteristically have three main components: author, title, and publication information. These components can help you determine the usefulness of this source for your paper. (In the same way, you can appraise a Web site by examining the home page carefully.)

   I. **Initial appraisal**
a. Author

- What are the author's credentials--institutional affiliation (where he or she works), educational background, past writings, or experience? Is the book or article written on a topic in the author's area of expertise?

- Has your instructor mentioned this author? Have you seen the author's name cited in other sources or bibliographies? Respected authors are cited frequently by other scholars. For this reason, always note those names that appear in many different sources.

- Is the author associated with a reputable institution or organization? What are the basic values or goals of the organization or institution?

b. Date of Publication

- When was the source published? This date is often located on the face of the title page below the name of the publisher. If it is not there, look for the copyright date on the reverse of the title page. On Web pages, the date of the last revision is usually at the bottom of the home page, sometimes every page.

- Is the source current or out-of-date for your topic? Topic areas of continuing and rapid development, such as the sciences, demand more current information. On the other hand, topics in the humanities often require material that was written many years ago. At the other extreme, some news sources on the Web now note the hour and minute that articles are posted on their site.

c. Edition or Revision

Is this a first edition of the publication or not? Further editions indicate a source has been revised and updated to reflect changes in knowledge, include omissions, and harmonize with its intended reader's needs. Also, many printings or editions may indicate that the work has become a standard source in the area and is reliable. If you are using a Web source, do the pages indicate revision dates?

d. Publisher

Note the publisher. If the source is published by a university press, it is likely to be scholarly. Although the fact that the publisher is reputable does not necessarily guarantee quality, it does show that the publisher may have high regard for the source being published.

e. Title of Journal

Is this a scholarly or a popular journal? This distinction is important because it indicates different levels of complexity in conveying ideas.
II. Content analysis

Having made an initial appraisal, you should now examine the body of the source. Read the preface to determine the author's intentions for the book. Scan the table of contents and the index to get a broad overview of the material it covers. Note whether bibliographies are included. Read the chapters that specifically address your topic. Scanning the table of contents of a journal or magazine issue is also useful. As with books, the presence and quality of a bibliography at the end of the article may reflect the care with which the authors have prepared their work.

a. Intended Audience

What type of audience is the author addressing? Is the publication aimed at a specialized or a general audience? Is this source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for your needs?

b. Objective Reasoning

- Is the information covered fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make you think their interpretations are facts.

- Does the information appear to be valid and well researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence? Assumptions should be reasonable. Note errors or omissions.

- Are the ideas and arguments advanced more or less in line with other works you have read on the same topic? The more radically an author departs from the views of others in the same field, the more carefully and critically you should scrutinize his or her ideas.

- Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-arousing words and bias?

c. Coverage

- Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? Does it extensively or marginally cover your topic? You should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.

d. Writing Style

Is the publication organized logically? Are the main points clearly presented? Do you find the text easy to read, or is it stilted or choppy? Is the author's argument repetitive?
C. Take good notes
It’s also a good idea to choose an efficient note-taking method before you begin. You will want to take good notes on the information you find and record all the publishing information necessary for citing your sources.

D. Using the library catalogue
Using the library catalogue is an important skill, and needs to be developed in order for you to become an efficient researcher.

I. Standard title/subject/author search

You can omit punctuation and capitalization.
Example: **whos afraid of virginia woolf**
Exception: keep hyphens in hyphenated words or phrases.
Example:
Find items starting with **many-valued logics** in title.

More tips General help

If you log in here, you will not need to log in again to use **my account**.
II. E-Resources search

Electronic resources can help you find a number of research items: journals, articles, newspapers, reviews, etc.

All handouts and slide presentations for Getting Started Early are available after the last workshop at http://www.uc.utoronto.ca/getting-started-handouts

1 Strategies for exploring possible topics are predominantly derived from The College Writer by Randall VanderMey, Verne Meyer, John Van Rys, Dave Kemper, and Pat Sebranek (Boston, 2004), 31-37.