CHAPTER ONE

THE PROCESS


Nervous yet? Don't worry. We're here to help.

In this chapter, we'll discuss how to dive into that giant mess of information and unearth what you need to create something coherent, structured, and usable.

Research (in the library or on the Web) is the process of searching for, selecting, evaluating, and using information to meet a need, answer a question, or resolve a problem.

We study the research process mostly from a classroom perspective, but you can apply these principles any time you need to find and use information. And when I say any time, I mean any time.

Research isn't something teachers, professors, and librarians make you do just because they like seeing you suffer... it's a skill set worth learning. These steps are useful outside the classroom, in the workplace, at home... everywhere!

Imagine your boss needs information on the competition's latest innovation. How do you get it? Does that used car you're looking at have a good safety record? Wondering if your child might need to see a doctor? How do you figure out what information is safe to use?

Thinking critically about information can help in the classroom but, just as importantly, also help you thrive in your life and career.
So what does it mean when I talk about the research “process”? Well, that depends on your preferences, style, purpose, and approach to learning.

Some researchers like to just jump into the information and “float around,” waiting to see what drifts by. Maybe they’ll snag a bit of useful peer-reviewed information here and there, or they’ll drift around this pile of unreliable blog posts and try to absorb it all at once. It’s a valid learning method, but it’s risky, requiring a razor-sharp grasp of what makes different pieces of information reliable (or not).

Others prefer a more structured path. It’s a little more guided and less dangerous...you’re less likely to drown in irrelevant information. This is the route that we’ll take most of the time.

The first option can be confusing, even overwhelming. With no research plan, you’re working without a safety net, but you may stumble across valuable information that you’d have missed otherwise.

The second option provides a nice clear path, but you might miss some of the cool stuff tucked away in the far corners of the information landscape.

That being said, you’ll probably figure out that research can be a messy process. There’s not usually a straight line from a question to an answer (at least for academic research questions). You’ll make some detours, maybe circle back around and try again, and will definitely have to overcome some obstacles.

You’ll also discover some new tools and techniques along the way. Just remember to think ahead, be flexible, and give yourself time to work through the process and ask librarians for help!
Regardless of what approach you take, you'll begin with an idea, a topic.

Pick something you're interested in, something you have a question about. If the topic is assigned or chosen for you, approach it in a way that will allow you to be creative and find the interesting aspects of the topic.

You'll find that your work will be much better if you're interested.

If the research is for a class, be sure you know what's expected from you. Read the details of the assignment, and ask your instructor for clarification if you're not sure of the assignment's purpose. That purpose will guide your research.

If, for example, you need to write an argument paper, you'll have to find information on both sides of an issue.

And be sure to plan ahead. You might think you can get away with putting things off until the last minute, but that will backfire eventually. You can never account for every possibility.

Wait until the last minute to do your research, and eventually that "last minute" will be the day your internet goes down, or the library gets fumigated, or you become the first flu case of the season.

Jeez, what are the odds?
OK, SORRY FOR THE LECTURE. BACK TO THE... Uh... LECTURE. SO, LET’S SAY YOU HAVE YOUR TOPIC, AND YOU'RE READY TO START RESEARCHING—

WHOA, HOLD UP. YEAH, THAT’S A TOPIC... A BIG TOPIC. A TOPIC THAT’S BEEN DISCUSSED BY THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF BOOKS, ARTICLES, WEBSITES, OLD MEN ON PORCHES...

ARE YOU REALLY UP TO SUMMARIZING ALL OF THAT IN TEN PAGES?

THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR!

THAT’S WHAT I THOUGHT. HERE’S WHAT WE’RE GOING TO DO. TAKE THAT TOPIC AND NARROW IT DOWN. CHOOSE ONE ASPECT OF YOUR TOPIC AND ASK A QUESTION ABOUT IT.

Hmm...OK.

WHO HAD BETTER WEAPONS DURING THE CIVIL WAR?

THAT’S A GOOD START!

STILL, THE QUESTION’S VERY BROAD, AND IT’S VAGUE. FIRST OF ALL, WHO IS “WHO”? AND WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY “BETTER”? BIGGER, FASTER, MORE... ALL OF THE ABOVE?

YOU’LL NEED TO CLARIFY YOUR QUESTION BY DIGGING A LITTLE DEEPER. COMING UP WITH A MANAGEABLE QUESTION CAN BE TOUGH WHEN YOU DON’T KNOW THE TOPIC WELL. IF THAT’S THE CASE, SPEAK WITH YOUR INSTRUCTOR, A LIBRARIAN, OR START WITH SOME GENERAL INFORMATION ON THE TOPIC.

(WELL TALK ABOUT HOW TO FIND THAT SOON.)

GO DO THAT. I’LL WAIT HERE.
1. How do you prefer to do research? Do you like to just “jump in” and see what information you come across? Or do you prefer to have more structure and develop your research methodically, from the ground up? Describe your normal process for developing a topic and finding information. What could you do to improve your own approach to the research process?

2. When searching online, how do you decide what information to look at and what information to ignore? How do you decide what is good or bad? Do you trust the search engine to provide you with the best information, or do you take steps to ensure that your search is designed to be effective?

3. Tell us about some research you’ve recently done. It doesn’t have to be for academic purposes. Remember, research is about a question you’ve had and the process of answering it. You might have tried to find a good, new sci-fi book to read, or you might not have understood a pop culture reference from your favorite show. It could be anything. How did you attempt to find information to answer the question? Did you find more than one resource to help you? Did those resources disagree or conflict? If so, how did that affect your next steps and eventual answer?

4. The next time you research a topic, try keeping track of the resources you locate, regardless of where you find them or what format they take. As you read through each resource, note how your views on the topic change and explain how what you’ve learned will determine your next steps. Show your results to your instructor, a librarian, or even a friend, and get some feedback from them.