

ARLENE QUARATIELLO

Sixth Edition



The College Student's Research Companion

FINDING, EVALUATING,
AND CITING THE RESOURCES
YOU NEED TO SUCCEED

ALA
Neal-Schuman
CHICAGO | 2024



available at alastore.ala.org

ARLENE QUARATIELLO wrote the first edition of *The College Student's Research Companion* in the mid-1990s while she was coordinator of library instruction at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts. She later taught freshman English as an adjunct instructor at St. Anselm College and various other institutions in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Her freelance writing pursuits have included essays for biographical encyclopedias, a book-length biography of Rachel Carson, and a Substack newsletter *Nowhere?* that analyzes utopian and dystopian literature. She currently serves as a representative from her hometown of Atkinson in the New Hampshire state legislature.

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ISBNs

978-0-8389-3838-6 (paper)

978-0-8389-3993-2 (PDF)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Quaratiello, Arlene Rodda, author.

Title: The college student's research companion : finding, evaluating, and citing the resources you need to succeed / Arlene Quaratiello.

Description: 6th edition. | Chicago : ALA Neal-Schuman, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "The newest edition of this valuable tool offers students easy-to-understand guidance on going beyond Google to find, evaluate, and use quality informational sources that will enable them to write better research papers"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023016496 (print) | LCCN 2023016497 (ebook) | ISBN 9780838938386 (paperback) | ISBN 9780838939932 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Library research—United States. | Internet research. | Electronic information resources. | Report writing.

Classification: LCC Z710 .Q37 2023 (print) | LCC Z710 (ebook) | DDC 025.5/24—dc23/eng/20230503

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023016496>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023016497>

Cover design by Kimberly Hudgins. Cover images © Adobe Stock.

Composition by Alejandra Diaz in the FreightText Pro and Brandon Grotesque typefaces.

Ⓢ This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper).

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 5 4 3 2 1

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PREFACE

IN HIS ARTICLE FROM THE ATLANTIC MAGAZINE'S JULY/AUGUST 2008 edition titled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?," author Nicholas Carr explains the effect that advances in information technology have had on his thought process: "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski." His vivid analogy suggests that easy access to information on the internet has made us all lazy and that we no longer have the patience to look more deeply for answers to our questions. We have come to rely on the superficiality of data rather than the depth of knowledge.

You may think that adequate research consists of using only internet sources that are freely accessible to anyone through a search engine. If this is the case, you will write superficial research papers that will more likely get mediocre grades. To write better research papers, you must go beyond the basics of googling your topic and learn how to use the wealth of other resources available to you.

Although this book certainly explains how to use Google and similar resources more effectively to find information on the internet, it also prepares you to go beyond the resources you have come to rely on so that you can find the most useful information online and maybe even offline. There's no need to simply make do with search results that aren't quite what you need just because there isn't enough time to find something better. This book shows you how to use your time wisely and do research effectively so that you ultimately can write better research papers.

Skimming the surface may offer some *quick* answers, but diving more deeply into your research will probably result in *better* answers. *The College Student's Research Companion* was written with this philosophy in mind. Information should be judged for its content, not its format—in other words, for its substance rather than its style. The ideas that are conveyed by an informational source are much more important than the glitzy new way they are conveyed. The successful research that results in better essays is based on evaluation criteria that focus on the content of informational sources rather than their

format, so it is ultimately based on enduring principles rather than the ever-changing developments in informational technology.

In explaining how to use the online tools that will help you find quality information, *The College Student's Research Companion* relies less on the details of how to use specific databases and more on the underlying logic that will enable you to use any such resources available to you. Although you may not use the same databases that are described in this book, the examples given demonstrate fundamentals to help you best use the particular resources that are available to you. Unavoidably, many of the online resources discussed in this book will change because this is the nature of the internet; web pages are frequently edited, and their addresses (URLs) often change. Much of this change has certainly proven to be superficial, so understanding the basic theories of doing research is what matters rather than getting bogged down in these kinds of details. The examples in this book emphasize the principles that endure rather than specific instructions that might become obsolete even before this book is published. With knowledge of the underlying theories, you will more easily be able to find quality informational resources.

Finding information using both internet search engines and library databases is just the beginning of the research process. In fact, with the online tools available today, you may be at risk of drowning in a sea of informational sources. That is why the ability to evaluate information is a major focus of this book. In this era of “false information,” “fake news,” and “alternative facts,” being able to judge the veracity of the information that you find is essential. Once you have determined which sources are most valuable to your research, you then need to know how to utilize these sources in your own writing. That’s why this book also explains how to integrate the information you find into your essays and how to give the credit due to the authors whose ideas have helped you better understand the topics you write about.

The chapters that follow explain the research process step by step from topic selection to documentation. In between, you’ll learn how to sift through the ever-increasing amount of junk that is out there on the internet these days by critically evaluating informational sources. Because so much information is primarily stored in databases these days, whether it be in library catalogs, periodical databases, or online reference sources, a basic understanding of database structure and searching is fundamental to research success. The specifics of finding, evaluating, and using articles, books, authoritative websites, and reference sources and understanding the types of information

provided by each medium will be highlighted in separate chapters. The final chapter explains how to integrate your sources into your own writing and avoid unintentional plagiarism.

This sixth edition of *The College Student's Research Companion* is based on the five previous editions (Neal-Schuman Publishers 1997–2011), which I wrote when I primarily worked as an academic reference librarian. Since then, I have taught freshman writing as an adjunct college English instructor for over a decade. This experience has given me added insight into the research process and its practical application to writing effective essays.

My ultimate purpose in writing this book, however, is not to simply help you get better grades on your research papers. That will likely be one positive result, but more importantly, I want you to truly appreciate the knowledge that you will gain by deep-diving into the informational seas and to become wise and productive members of our information-based, data-driven society.

Preliminary Steps

BEFORE EMBARKING ON ANY EXPEDITION, PREPARATION IS CRUCIAL. First, a destination must be chosen because, without one, you'd just be wandering with no purpose. With a clear end point, a plan for how to get there must be devised. Questions such as "What route should be taken?" and "What modes of transportation should be used?" must be answered. Similarly, before starting your research, you need to have a clear purpose and a plan for achieving it. You do this by choosing a topic and then identifying the means by which you will find information on this topic. This chapter explains what you must do before you can start actually looking for the informational sources that will help you to write an effective research paper.

SELECTING YOUR TOPIC

The first step in the research process is to choose a topic that fulfills a given assignment. Determining your topic for a research paper is crucial in the same way that knowing what address to enter in your phone's map app is essential if you want to reach a destination and not just go on a joyride.

Choose a topic that you feel enthusiastic about. Think about the class discussions that roused you from an impending nap or about a video that you saw on YouTube that left you thinking long after you finished watching it. I think the title of a classic '90s dance tune, "Things That Make You Go 'Hmmm,'" best describes the feeling that you should have about your proposed topic. Brainstorming, a process that eliminates judgment and entertains any

idea, no matter how crazy, is an effective technique, so write a list of any ideas that come to mind.

Let's suppose that you have just been assigned a persuasive essay on a current controversial issue of your choice. You have to pick a side, present the pros and cons, and ultimately persuade your reader to agree with your opinion. For this type of paper, it is especially important to choose a topic that interests you because it is much easier to argue for a position if you feel strongly about the issue. Come up with a focus that will be relevant to your interests. A computer science major taking a required writing class, for example, could relate a given assignment to computers by writing about the pros and cons of YouTube algorithms that affect which videos get displayed in a user's feed. A premed student could research the efficacy of CBD oil in the treatment of pain versus other medications.

You may have a few ideas right away. Consider these broad subjects, and then try to think of some narrower relevant topics. Suppose you love animals and so have always been concerned about their treatment by humans. The subject of animal rights is too large to address in an average-length research paper, which is generally fewer than ten pages. Think of some more specific subtopics. Here are a few suggestions:

- Treatment of circus animals
- Treatment of zoo animals
- Use of animals in cosmetic testing
- Use of animals in medical testing

Ultimately, for an assignment such as this, you need to choose a side and include a concise statement in the introduction of your paper that summarizes your argument and purpose in writing the paper. This statement, called a thesis, generally develops out of your research and is not necessary when starting out. Initially for research purposes, just narrowing down your broad subject to a particular topic is enough. You may need to do some preliminary research in order to decide which side you are on. Or you may already be a firm supporter of one side; if this is your situation, finding some information on the subject will help you to develop a thesis.

A thesis is basically a further narrowing of your already narrowed topic. For example, if your paper concerns the use of animals in cosmetic testing, a possible thesis is "The use of animals in cosmetic testing should be banned

because the superficial purpose of cosmetics does not justify the pain and suffering such testing causes animals.” As this example shows, a basic persuasive essay thesis should answer two basic questions: What do I believe? Why do I believe this? The first question is answered by a clause that often includes the word *should*, while the second question is answered by a clause that often follows the word *because*. These two words do not have to be used in a thesis statement, but you’ll know if you have a strong thesis if you could hypothetically express it with them. A similar formula can be applied to most other research assignments. Although this book is not intended to go into detail about how to actually write your paper, a strong thesis will set you in the right direction and help you to determine your research needs.

Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (owl.purdue.edu/owl/), also known simply as OWL, provides more information not only on the crucial steps of topic selection and thesis generation but also for every other step of the writing process that goes beyond the scope of this book. OWL also has useful information to supplement my explanation of the research process. Bookmark this site on your web browser so that you have easy access to it! The OWL site includes the following pages relevant to the preliminary steps you should take before beginning your research: “Choosing a Topic,” “Invention: Starting the Writing Process,” and “Tips and Examples for Writing Thesis Statements.”

Keep in mind that, although you may need a topic to get your research started, the topic may evolve as you move ahead with the project. Things that you learn along the way may alter your expectations and interests. As you proceed with your research, your opinions may even change. That’s OK. This evolution is also why you should not set your thesis in stone right away. Give yourself some wiggle room to explore your topic.

There are general ways to narrow down your topic that you may want to consider if you discover that the topic is too broad for the assignment. Here are some of the most common limiters:

Geographical. If you are writing about illegal immigration, you could limit this topic geographically and focus on a particular state like Arizona or a country other than the United States.

Chronological. If you are writing about space exploration, you could focus on the Apollo moon landings of the 1970s, the space shuttle flights of the 1980s and 1990s, or the current trend in private space travel by SpaceX and other companies.

Chapter 1

Demographic. A topic such as bullying could focus on elementary school students, middle school students, or high school students.

When you feel that you have focused on an interesting subject, write down a topic phrase that includes important terms defining your topic. These phrases may sound a bit like research paper titles, but your paper will likely have a different title. Underline or circle the keywords, and brainstorm any other synonymous words. Maintain a list and add to it as you think of related terms. These keywords will be very important when it comes time to search online resources. For example:

- The *significance* of the *Olympics* in *Ancient Greek society* versus the modern Olympics
 - a. *significance*: importance; influence
 - b. *Olympics*: sports, athletics, Olympic Games, Olympiad, marathon
 - c. *Ancient Greece*: Hellenistic, Grecian, classical, ancient world
 - d. *society*: culture, civilization
- The *abuse of animals* in *zoos*
 - a. *abuse*: maltreatment, harm
 - b. *animals*: elephants, lions, tigers, horses
 - c. *zoos*: wildlife park, Disney’s Animal Kingdom

You may also find it helpful to write down the major research questions that you’ll want to answer. If you were to write a paper about animal abuse in zoos, here are just a few questions you would need to address:

- What animals are likely to be abused and why?
- How are animals abused in zoos?
- Which zoos abuse animals?
- To what extent are animals abused in zoos?
- How can abuse be prevented?

These are just a few questions that come to mind, and the list above is certainly not exhaustive. Writing such a list will give you a clearer understanding of your research needs. For example, the questions above reflect the need for both anecdotal information about zoo animal abuse in the form of specific true stories and statistical information that would convey the extent of the problem overall.

PLANNING YOUR RESEARCH

After you've determined your preliminary topic following the guidelines above, you should make a research plan by identifying the types of sources that will provide you with the information you need, determining where and how you will find these sources, and developing a time line for completing research tasks.

Although browsing on the internet can be effective in the preliminary phase of research by helping you select a topic and perhaps find some general information, it's not a very good method once you've chosen a topic—especially if your topic is very narrow. So think of browsing as a cruise to nowhere that has no particular destination, although you may see some interesting things along the way. There's nothing wrong with browsing. It's actually a great way to learn. But if you wait until the day before a paper is due, you won't have time to go down all the intriguing rabbit holes that the internet is famous for.

Types of Sources

Periodical Articles

Periodicals include all publications that come out on an ongoing basis, including popular magazines, scholarly journals, and newspapers. As with books, a standardized editorial process is usually employed, which gives the material added validity.

The best way to find articles is to search your library's online periodical databases rather than going straight to an internet search engine. Chapter 4 will explain how to do this effectively. The differences between magazines and journals will also be discussed at greater length there. These two terms are not synonymous. The word *magazine* usually indicates a publication of nontechnical articles aimed at a wider, more generalized audience; the word *journal* is more often used when referring to an academic source, but the distinction can be blurry. Sometimes periodicals are the best sources for information on narrower or more current topics.

Books

Despite the emergence of electronic books as well as audiobooks, the first thing that probably comes to mind when you hear the word *book* is still the

traditional image of a bunch of paper pages bound together between back and front covers. Although such books do still make up the bulk of most library collections, I will refer to such sources as *print books* to distinguish them from those in other formats. Two main types of print books are kept in libraries: circulating books (those you can check out) and reference books (those you must use within the library). Most reference books such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, and handbooks, which used to take up shelves and shelves of space in libraries, however, are now accessed online via the library's website. These sources are useful for obtaining quick and concise factual information on a broad range of topics.

Many books are still available only in print, but this number is certainly decreasing as more and more books are digitized. But there will always be a demand for print books. You may be one of the increasing number of students who, despite the proliferation of e-books, has come to appreciate the print format and prefers to actually hold a book in your hands and take a much-needed break from staring at a computer screen all day. Print books are arranged by Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal Classification numbers. You determine which print books your library has (as well as electronic and audio versions) and how you can get them by using the online catalog, which can be accessed on the library's home page.

Whether you read an e-book online, listen to an audiobook, or hold a print book in your hands, the content is similar. Books provide a depth of coverage unequalled by other formats. Although, technically, anyone can become an author these days because of self-publishing platforms and on-demand printing, most books printed by reputable publishers are written by authors with some expertise and must go through a rigorous editorial process before being published. Facts must be checked, and sources of information confirmed. This level of editorial control is lacking on the internet, where anyone can post information.

If you are hesitant to use books in your research because their length is intimidating, keep in mind that you don't have to read them cover to cover. Maybe there's just one pertinent chapter. Review the table of contents and index to determine which parts of a book to focus on.

Websites

The internet can be compared to an iceberg: The visible tip of an iceberg constitutes only a fraction of the entire iceberg, while the hidden portion underwater is the largest part. In the same way, websites that you find using a search engine represent only a fraction of what is actually on the internet. This tip of the internet is sometimes referred to as the *surface web*, while most of the rest, including e-books, periodical databases, and other important research materials, are found in the part known as the *deep web*, the *invisible web*, or the *hidden web*. A subsection of the *deep web* is the *dark web*, which has become infamous for its amount of criminal activity. The library's databases for finding articles, books, and other information are another part of the deep web; they often require login credentials, including a username and password. Most of the internet consists of such proprietary material.

Keep in mind that anyone can post just about anything on the surface web, and sites often lack depth, authority, and accuracy. Although a great deal of interesting material is found through internet search engines and it can be a good source of quick information, proceed with caution.

Other Sources

Not all informational sources fit neatly into the categories above. One example that comes to mind is a medium that has exploded in popularity in the past decade: podcasts. These audio sources are accessible via a number of apps, including Spotify, TuneIn, and Apple Podcasts. You can now find a podcast on just about any topic. Your main concern when using such sources, of course, is the credibility of the speaker.

Although this book is primarily concerned with what is called secondary research, don't overlook primary research, which includes interviewing people who may have special knowledge or experience related to your topic. Although some periodical articles are written in an interview Q&A format, often you can find a podcast that features an interview or a video interview on YouTube. Of course, YouTube is the most popular platform for accessing videos, and you can find some reputable sources here, but there is also a lot of junk that can sidetrack you from your research. It is very easy to get distracted by viral videos of cats doing ridiculous things!

Don't overlook your library's own collection of other material. Your library might provide access to such valuable sources as videos, government documents, conference papers, dissertations, and photos. Many libraries also have special collections that may relate in some way to the school's curriculum or local history.

How and Where to Find Sources

The best place to start your research is at your library's website. The home page should provide access to the databases, which are used for finding articles, as well as the online catalog, which is used for finding books. Most library websites also provide guides (often called LibGuides after the popular software that is used to create them). These customized guides will help you determine the best resources for specific subject areas.

To find articles in periodicals, it's inefficient to browse through physical issues of magazines or journals or search the web, hoping to find the complete text of an article on your topic. Instead, you should select the appropriate periodical databases available online through your library's website. Each one of these databases covers a different set of periodicals. Some databases cover broad ranges of subjects, and others focus on narrower disciplines. Often, there is a lot of overlap, and many periodical databases are available.

Use your library's online catalog to find books and other library material on your topic. This online catalog is important because its contents have survived some sort of vetting process that ensures that these sources have authority. From the catalog, you obtain titles and either weblinks or library call numbers. Call numbers are essential for obtaining the physical items described in the catalog, as is an understanding of the organizational system (either Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress Classification) at your library.

To find publicly accessible websites, you must know how internet search engines work. Just as online catalogs enable you to find books and periodical databases help you find articles, search engines locate websites. Google is currently the most popular web search engine, so much so that *google* has emerged in everyday conversation as a verb to denote looking for information by using Google. But numerous other sites also enable you to find websites. When you use these tools, which are far from perfect, you often find a lot of irrelevant material that might seem interesting but is really useless. This

problem is due partly to the amount of junk that is on the web, partly to ineffective use of the search engines, and partly to the design of the tools themselves. You can never be quite sure what you're going to find. Although you can't control the content of the web or the way search engines work, you can learn to use them as effectively as possible.

Planning your research also involves such decisions as whether to use the resources of another library. No library can buy every book or provide access to every periodical source (either in print or online), so you may have to go elsewhere for the material you need, particularly if another library has a special collection that relates to your subject. Many smaller academic libraries have very limited budgets and select books based on the specific academic programs of the school. A college that specializes in technology will likely choose a great number of science books for its library, but it may not contain a great collection in literature and the fine arts. Your library, however, might be a member of a consortium, which is a group of libraries in the same area that shares resources.

You can also get materials through interlibrary loan (ILL), a service that locates a hard-to-find book or article elsewhere in the country and delivers it to your library. This helpful system is available at most libraries, but plan on allowing at least a week or two for the material to arrive. In some cases, it can take much less time—especially if what you need is an article that can be photocopied and faxed or e-mailed—but don't depend on ILL at the last minute. To be honest, you probably won't need ILL services for most research papers until you are an upperclassman in college or even a graduate student, but remember this service because it will certainly be useful in your future studies.

Time Management

Although waiting until the last minute is a common practice among busy students, you should expect to be particularly stressed if you do this. The research process is time-consuming, no matter how many time-saving hints you learn. Another important aspect of the planning stage is determining how long you will need to do your research and complete your paper.

There are two phases to completing a research paper: doing the research and writing the paper. These processes, each of which should take about

an equal amount of time, often overlap. However, many students consider the research process a painful task to endure and get out of the way quickly. Doing research, however, should be a rewarding and even enjoyable process, especially considering how much time you will devote to it. Research is a major component of a research paper; that's why it's called a *research* paper. Without good information, you have nothing to write about. Effective research is the first step in writing papers that will get high marks.

The required length of the paper will determine when you should start your research. The average research paper is six to eight pages long. The University of Minnesota Libraries' website has an "Assignment Calculator" tool (lib.umn.edu/services/ac/research-paper) that helps break down the process of writing a research paper into manageable steps. There are boxes in which to enter the date you plan to start your research and the date the paper is due. The calculator will respond to your input with a personalized day-by-day guide to the steps you should be taking, including selecting a topic; finding and evaluating books, articles, and websites; and writing a first draft.

Allow yourself, however, time for setbacks along the way—for example, the results from your Google search all seem to be ads in disguise, a book you need at the library has been checked out, you realize that you'll have to go to another library or get a book through interlibrary loan, the computer system has crashed—any number of unfortunate scenarios can occur. Then again, sometimes your gut instinct tells you when it's time to start the research process, as a mild anxiety comes over you.

Because the cure for worry is action, just getting started will make you feel better. Set aside a short time for an initial visit to the library well in advance of your paper's due date or spend some time exploring the library's online resources. Spend an hour each day on your research, but don't put any pressure on yourself. You don't even have to be successful in finding anything. Just spend that hour each day on research. Chances are good that the time you spend will have positive results. Then try again the next day. Take small steps, and you'll see that everything will slowly come together. Read on, and I hope that you will feel the same way because I truly want you to enjoy this process of writing a research paper rather than feeling overwhelmed by it.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions are designed to help you brainstorm and choose a topic and then formulate a research plan. Every reader's responses will differ, so a set of sample responses are provided in appendix A.

1. Fill in the blank: The purpose of this research assignment is to _____.
2. What are the first three ideas that come to mind when thinking about this assignment?
3. How can you relate your assignment to your college major or favorite academic subject?
4. Once you feel that you have narrowed down your ideas to a specific topic, compose a simple phrase that describes this topic.
5. Write a list of the most important keywords in the phrase you wrote in question 4.
6. Next to each keyword in your list, write down any synonyms that you can think of.
7. Can you limit your topic in any way to narrow it down further: chronologically, geographically, culturally, etc.?
8. What are the major research questions that you will need to answer?
9. Which of the following resources do you expect will be most helpful in your research? Explain your choices.
 - magazine articles
 - scholarly journal articles
 - newspaper articles
 - books
 - websites
 - reference sources
 - interviews
 - other material

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