Chapter 1

Finding a Research Question and the Resources to Write about It

Getting Started—Choosing a General Topic

For various reasons, many students see the choice of a topic as a big obstacle. It is true that the choice of a good topic is extremely important, but the task isn't so daunting when approached systematically, and it should certainly not be paralyzing.

Some students find it difficult to imagine a topic that might serve them well because they do not see the possibilities, many of them right under their noses. When the teacher leaves it to you to find a topic, you have the opportunity to write on a fairly wide range of subjects. In a history course, you must write on the region (Europe, the United States, China, etc.) and period (ancient, early modern, modern, etc.) covered by the course, but you could focus on economic, political, intellectual, cultural, or social history, and within each of these categories you have many choices. In a sociology course focused on the family, you can write about relations among families or sibling rivalries, or the behavior of families in different economic situations, or families and religion. In literature, music history, or art history, you will have a wide choice of works, artists, movements, and themes to study. Paper assignments—at least those above the introductory level—are not like exams. They don't require you to answer someone else's questions but rather give you an opportunity to define a topic and answer a question of your own. In that way, they are liberating. Yet this liberty creates anxiety in some students precisely because there are so many possibilities to choose from. How to choose?

Start looking for a topic by thinking about your own interests. Are you interested in economics? Consider questions about the economics of a period, a region, an institution, even about how a literary author portrays or uses economics in a story. Interested in biology? The role of disease or medical practices and beliefs might provide a good topic. Be assured that in humanities and social science courses, you will have many opportunities to pursue your particular interests.

A textbook can be a good place to start your search for a general topic. Peruse the chapter and subchapter headings. When you find something that interests you, read it and see if the author's bibliography can direct you to other works that would deepen your knowledge of the subject. When you have a general idea of what might interest you, look in the library's subject catalog for titles that seem relevant and interesting. (There will be more on using the library later in this chapter.)

The general topic should be broad enough to allow you to read a variety of interesting materials, yet not so broad as to be vague or amorphous. For a 10-page research paper, a topic such as "the rise of the middle class," with no specification of the society or period in question, would be much too broad to guide you in your initial reading. Specifying the period and place—"the rise of the middle class in England in the 18th century"—would allow you to start reading. (Later you would select some narrower aspect of this topic to focus on, and the final topic would have to be quite focused. If, for example, you were interested in middle-class women, a topic such as "women in the 18th century" would still be too broad for a final topic, so you would have to narrow your focus to a topic such as the education of 18th-century English women, or their role in education, or their role in the English economy, or their legal rights, and so forth.) Similarly, a topic such as "childhood" would not give you sufficient guidance about where to start and what to read. Specifying where and when would help, but in order to achieve an appropriately broad, general topic, you would have to focus on some aspect of childhood—"the concept of childhood in West Africa" (anthropology or sociology), perhaps, or "the education of children in early 19th-century England" (history or English). An appropriately broad topic suggests a bibliography and a section of the library to search.

Just as unhelpful as a topic that is too broad, a topic that is too narrow might lead you to a very small shelf; little if anything might have been written about it. You will find little scholarship on "the place of puppet theater in contemporary Cambodian society," even if you read Khmer, French, or Japanese. By choosing a broad general topic, you maximize your chance of finding something interesting, feasible, and substantial to work on.

Here are some examples of good, appropriately broad, general topics in a few different disciplines:

In history:
- Women in the Reformation
- New technology and social change in the Industrial Revolution
- Economic change in T'ang Dynasty China

In sociology:
- Social class and race in American cities
- Church communities and social class
- Educational performance and family background

In literature:
- Short stories published in *The Atlantic Monthly* during the 1920s and 1930s
- British novels about seafaring in the mid-19th century
- Images of women in the literature of the Progressive Era in America

In art history:
- The influence of European styles on Native American rug design in the 19th century
- Roman funerary art
- Art and theories of light in 17th-century Dutch painting

In anthropology:
- Food customs in Amazonian culture
- The role of law in tribal society
- The survival of traditional religious beliefs in societies recently converted to Christianity or Islam

In political science:
- Voting patterns among U.S. working-class women
- Courts and institutional change in constitutional systems
- Lobbying and legislation on food safety

Remember: You are looking for a topic that interests you and meets the criteria that the instructor set in the assignment. You may think that if you are taking a course in your major or you are a non-major who has chosen to take the course, this advice is superfluous; you are already interested in the subject. However, the topic of a paper is much more specific than the topic of a course. To find a topic, start from your disciplinary or subject-area interests—science, engineering, literature, visual art, law, etc.—and consider what general topics relating to your interests fit the course you are taking. You will do your best work when you work on topics that reflect your interests.

Gathering Information on Your Broad, General Topic

When you have an idea about what general topic you wish to work on, you should begin gathering information on it. Today, many people start looking for information on the Internet. However, the Internet has drawbacks as a source. First, most of the material on the Internet is in short articles, which will not give you enough information to lead to the next stage of your reading. For example, Wikipedia articles tend to be brief and focused on specific subjects. (Moreover, you don't know the identity of the authors or anything about their credibility, and the articles often contain incorrect or partial information.) Thus, starting your research on the Internet might provide you with some very basic information about some aspects of your topic, but using only the Internet will often give you a fragmented body of information of uncertain accuracy or value.

Finding a recent general book on your topic and mining it for information is the best strategy for getting started. You can find such a book by looking at the reviews in the major scholarly journal of the discipline you are working in, such as the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Political Science Review*, and the *American Economic Review*. Your instructor or a reference librarian can tell you which journals would be most useful. Book reviews will tell you whether scholars in the discipline think a book is a good survey of a field or topic and often will give you some insight into the book's take on a subject. If the reviewer notes that the author advances a particular interpretation of an issue he or she covers, consider the interpretation itself as a topic for your paper. A difference of opinion about a subject implies at least the general question, "What is it about the evidence on that subject that permits different conclusions to be drawn from it?" A book review might indicate a number of narrow questions to be considered.

A general book will give you basic information about your subject. In art history, the book will introduce you to the major artists of a period or movement, provide some illustrations of their work, and characterize their interests, styles, and so on. In anthropology, the book will tell you which aspects of which societies have been studied and what scholars have concluded from these studies. In economics, the work might tell you what theories have been proposed, how scholars have built models to test them, and what data is available for you to use. The authors of general works of scholarship will have organized the material into a coherent narrative or analysis from which you can get a grasp of the subject as a whole, and they will have done a lot of scholarly work for you.

First, the bibliography will be a trove of resources for your project. Just reading the titles of the works the author used will provide you with suggestions about where to look next. Second, pay attention to the footnotes; you may find your topic in one of them, because authors often use footnotes to discuss a scholarly controversy over the interpretation of evidence or to reject another scholar's thesis. Third, don't ignore the table of contents or index (especially if it is a subject index); both can help you find a topic by showing how an author has structured her research as well as by revealing considerations her research has taken into account and suggesting others it might have neglected. Finally, the author will point you to the evidence on the subject and where it can be found.

Finding Your Narrow, Specific Topic

Your job at this stage is to find a relatively narrow, specific topic within the broad general topic that interests you. A big topic includes many smaller topics, and as you read you should be looking for subtopics that catch your eye. The thing about a topic most likely to catch your attention is a question it raises. The author may write something that does not satisfy you, prompting a question of your own; or you may find that two authors disagree on the answer to a previously posed question. (As noted, the controversy might be revealed in a footnote rather than in the text.) When a question occurs to you or you get an urge to know more, you have an opening to a potential topic for your paper. You will find that questions occur to you at critical points in a scholar's work—places where the author explicitly disagrees with another scholar (which indicates that the point is controversial); places where the author changes direction (usually by using words like "however," "but," and "although"); and places where you think the evidence cited to support a point doesn't really do so.

In looking for a specific topic for your paper, then, you are looking not just for a topic but for a question about it. You may be interested in a suitably narrow topic and want to read about it, but you do not have the basis for a research paper until you have a question you want to answer. You do research not just to collect information but to advance a position or thesis, which is the answer to a question; the question must come first. Chapter 3 will introduce you to different types of questions, but for now, note that you are looking for a question that you can't answer by simply looking in a reference book or Wikipedia. A question such as, "When was Abraham Lincoln elected to the Illinois Legislature?" is of no use; you can answer it by looking in an encyclopedia. You are looking for a question that cannot be answered so simply or definitively, such as "What did Lincoln hope to accomplish in the Gettysburg Address?" That question will take you to the text of the Address itself; to what we know about how and when Lincoln wrote it; to why he thought it important to go to Gettysburg to deliver the speech; to questions about why he made it so short when his contemporaries were in the habit of giving speeches that lasted for hours; and so forth. On this topic, and its subtopics, you'll find a great deal of scholarly work and many different opinions. This kind of open-ended question is perfect for a research paper.

Evidence and Sources of Evidence

Once you have a question, you need to find information that will help you answer it: you are looking for sources. They come in two types. The first is scholarship, which is the type you used when trying to formulate your question. Scholars do what you are doing: they formulate questions; find evidence that they can use to answer the questions; and construct arguments, based on evidence, that support the answers they want to give. However, scholarly opinion is not evidence; you cannot cite a scholar's opinion to prove a point you want to make. But you *can* cite it to show that you are not alone in the way you interpret the evidence or to show, by disagreeing with a scholar's view, that you have taken an independent position. For you, scholarship will most often provide guidance to the evidence you need and interpretations of the evidence that you can use in creating your own interpretation. (There will be more on evidence and interpretation in Chapter 6.)

The second and more important type of source consists of or offers evidence about your topic. **Evidence is data or information used to support a claim**. Usually, the actors, authors, or institutions whose actions, works, or character you wish to explain will have produced the evidence. (It may also have been produced by scholars who have collected data, such as surveys of public opinion, on your subject.) Evidence thus comes in many types: in literature, it most often consists of passages from the works you are writing about; in art history, works of art and the writings of and interviews with artists; in economics, data such as that produced by government agencies (the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. Commerce Department, the World Bank, etc.); in history, documents, writings, and artworks produced by the people of the time and place you are studying. In some fields, such as sociology and political science, you might collect your own evidence by doing a survey of your fellow students or by interviewing a number of them, but you might also use existing survey results published or available through a social science databank.

The usual terms for the two types of sources are "primary" and "secondary." **Primary sources consist of or contain the evidence you use in your argument. Secondary sources are scholarly works that refer to, explain, and interpret evidence and its sources.**

In some fields, such as anthropology and some areas of sociology, using primary sources directly may be impractical because you cannot spend months living in a foreign society, interviewing its members, and observing their lives. In such cases, the notes and transcripts, descriptions, and recordings of events and performances that scholars have made during their work in the field could be considered primary sources, while the interpretation offered by the observer, surveyor, or interviewer could be considered secondary sources. However, in these disciplines the author of the secondary source is often actually a participant in the creation of the "primary" sources, and the field notes and other "raw" materials are only rarely available to others. When you are working in a field that relies on participant-observer techniques, you have to focus on the way the data was collected, assembled, and used by the author as well as on the data itself.

In such fields, where the true primary materials (field notes, etc.) are not available, assignments for research papers typically ask you to assess the scholarship on a subject, and in such assignments secondary sources become your primary sources. You will make arguments that rest on what scholars have written and on the way they have used the evidence they collected in their fieldwork. For example, in 1928 Margaret Mead published a study of Samoan society (*Coming of Age in Samoa*) that became a major work in anthropology. The book was immediately controversial with the reading public because it portrayed a society with sexual mores fundamentally different from those in Western societies and, as many Western Europeans and Americans saw it, at odds with morally acceptable relations between the sexes. Some anthropologists also criticized the work, but it was not until 1983 that Derek Freeman published a thorough analysis and critique of the work, challenging its authority as a sound work of anthropological scholarship and setting off a controversy that reverberated well beyond the discipline of anthropology. A paper on this controversy would take the views of Mead, Freeman, and others as evidence and use their works as primary sources.

Anthropology is not the only discipline in which paper assignments require students to review the scholarly literature on a topic. Such assignments are common in both introductory and upper-level courses in all disciplines. But how do these papers relate to those in which you use raw evidence collected out in the field or surviving data from a particular period of history? The objective of a research paper focused on a body of scholarship is to find the source(s) of the debates among the scholars. The controversy might have arisen from differences in the questions that the scholars asked, or in differing views about how the evidence should have been collected, or in differing assessments of the reliability of the evidence.

The most general question about a scholarly debate is, "Why do scholars differ on this matter?" Just answering that question might be the basis of a paper, but in many cases you will have to find the specific issue on which they differ and formulate a question about it, such as, "Why do some scholars regard the data on race in the U.S. Census to be seriously flawed?" What makes this kind of paper a research paper is that it requires you to find the scholarship on the subject and then assess it. You have to formulate a question and a thesis about the scholarly treatment of the subject and construct an argument to support that thesis. If all you do is write a report on the scholarly literature you found, you will not have completed the assignment.

Finding Sources

How do you find primary and secondary sources? If you found your topic by reading, you will also have found some leads to further reading. The footnotes and bibliographies of the authors you have read will have given you a start. The Internet can also help, and you may already be in the habit of getting on the Internet to find what you need. You type a search term into a search engine and then sift through the hundreds or thousands of results. Some will be relevant, most will not. If the search term was reasonably specific, the items that come up at the top of the list are likely to be the most relevant to your interests. By defining your search terms, you impose order on what is actually a chaotic environment, and you increase the likelihood that you will find relevant information quickly. However, while the Internet's content is vast, in many fields of knowledge it is not even close to comprehensive and useful. The Internet is like a flea market. There are valuable things there, but you have to know how to judge value before you "buy." (There will be more on the reliability of Internet sources in the next section of this chapter.)

Caveats about relying on the Internet also apply to using documentaries, such as those broadcast on the History Channel, the Discovery Channel, and the National Geographic Channel. Some documentaries have valuable material in them, especially original footage of events that you may be interested in, but on the whole such documentaries are not very useful. They are not works of scholarship. They do not ordinarily reveal their sources or give any indication about how the filmmaker put the story together. The critical questions about the size and condition of the archive used are either not asked or not adequately answered as part of the film. The filmmaker rarely discusses other views of the subject or how he or she selected material to be included. In a few cases, professional journals publish scholarly assessments of documentary films, and such reviews can make the films quite useful,[1] but in general it is wise to avoid such sources.

Academic libraries are the best places to start. They contain materials chosen by specialists to represent the best information on a wide range of subjects, including nearly all of the kinds of subjects one deals with in research papers. Libraries purchase only a small percentage of what is published each year, but they typically acquire the kind of works most useful to faculty and students. Librarians purchase materials from publishers or sources that have established and respected processes for screening what they publish. They consult with faculty members about books and journals in their fields. Today, librarians also add websites to the library collection by creating links between their library web pages and the sites of organizations—such as scholarly associations or government agencies—that screen the content of their sites in a way similar to the way good publishers screen manuscripts.

Librarians have also organized the collections by author, title, and subject, so that a user can find materials by searching the catalog (now an electronic catalog in almost every large library) in a variety of ways. The subject catalog is a boon to anyone beginning a research project; in the course of more than a century of cataloging, librarians have developed an extensive, organized list of subjects. In the electronic catalog, you can also look for materials by keyword, as you do in Internet search engines. A keyword search will produce a list of materials in which the word appears, in the subject category, title, or, if the work has been digitized, in the text.

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[1] For example, *Perspectives,* the newsletter of the American Historical Association, occasionally reviews documentaries and films, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* often does.

When you look at a book's catalog entry, you see a list of the subject areas under which the cataloguer classified it. Had you searched by one of those subjects, the book would have come up as one of your search results. Here is an example:

Author	Woodward, C. Vann (Comer Vann) 1908-
Title	**Origins of the new South, 1877-1913**
Published	[Baton Rouge] Louisiana State University Press, 1951
Description	xi, 542 p. illus. 24 cm
Series	A History of the South, v. 9
Note	"Critical essay on authorities": p. 482-515
Subject	Southern States -- History -- 1865-
	Southern States -- Social Conditions

(Library of Congress cataloguing data)

The cataloguer has classified this book under two subjects, each in the form of a composite string of headings and subheadings: "Southern States—History—1865–" and "Southern States—Social Conditions." In the first subject, "Southern States" is the main heading and appears alongside two subheadings: "History" and "1865–"; in this instance, "History—1865–" indicates that the history of the period after 1865 was a significant one for the Southern States. Had you searched the subject catalog under "Southern States" without including any subheading, the strings that include the subheadings "History—1865–" and "Social Conditions" would have appeared among your results, and *Origins of the New South, 1877–1913* would have been hyperlinked to both of the applicable strings. The catalog entry for every item in the library—book, video, or other medium—contains these kinds of subject identifiers.

Because you may begin your search without knowing the exact subject (or even the main heading) under which librarians have catalogued the kind of work you want, it is often a good idea to begin a search using the **keyword** command. Simply type in a term under which you think it might be promising to search and hit "search." A **simple keyword search** may yield results that are both relevant and sufficiently well defined to be of use to you; it may moreover help you discover a catalog entry for a book that proves of interest to you, one that reveals the exact subject entries under which books of the kind you want have been catalogued, which can in turn lead you to other titles of interest.

If the results generated by a simple keyword search prove unsatisfactory, you can often perform an **advanced keyword search** that generates results using Boolean operators; such a search can generate results that indicate: the conjunction of two or more keywords (that is, results that include this term **and** that term); the disjunction of two or more keywords (results that include this term **or** that term); or the exclusion of one keyword from another (results that include this term **when not associated with** that term). You come up with keywords and select the operators; the engine does the sifting.

Keyword searches turn up sources that contain both primary evidence and scholarly works. The keyword "Southern States" will produce a list that includes collections of data (primary sources) about the American south—data on population, the economy, public health, agricultural production, and so forth, as well as works written long ago, such as Arthur Fremantle's report on a three-month trip he took in the South during 1863 and scholarly works (secondary sources) like C. Vann Woodward's book on the origins of the new South. (Note that Fremantle's work is a report from direct observation and should be treated as primary evidence for a study of the South during the Civil War.)

Searches in library catalogs yield lists of books. They do not find articles published in scholarly journals or databases maintained by government agencies or scholarly institutes and databanks. There are many ways to find sources of those kinds. JStor is an online collection of scholarly journals that have been digitized. The collection contains journals in most disciplines of the humanities and social sciences and has volumes up to three years before the current issue. (For the most recent issues, you have to go to the library for the print copies.) You can get access to JStor through the web page of nearly all academic libraries, which routinely subscribe to the collection. You will also find guides to scholarly articles in such databases as the Social Science Citation Index, Sociological Abstracts, and the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (ABELL), which list both primary and secondary materials. There are similar guides to sources in nearly every academic discipline, and most academic libraries list them under "Databases" or some such title on the homepage of their catalogs.

You may start by looking in that list, but you will be wise also to ask a reference librarian for help. Reference librarians are the scholar's friends. They know more about the resources of the library and the Internet than anyone else, and they are there to help you. Today, reference librarians are linked together in a large network, so if the local librarians cannot answer a question, they can send out a call for help to colleagues at libraries all over the country and beyond.

As with the search engines used to find things on the Internet, library catalog search engines list the search results in order of relevancy, as judged by the built-in rules that govern the engine's operation. In most cases, the books or articles that contain your search phrase in the title or those listed in a category from the subject catalog will be listed first, followed by works in which the phrase occurs many times in the text, and then by those in which it occurs only a few times, and so on. Before you start running around the stacks to retrieve material, look over the whole list, but expect to find the most relevant materials for your subject at the top of the list.

Evaluating the Credibility of Sources

When you walk into a campus library or access its electronic catalog, you make certain assumptions about what you will find there. You assume that people who know how to judge the credibility of sources, who know good scholarship from bad, and who choose the good and reject the bad selected the materials in the collection. You can use the materials you find in the library of a good academic institution with a lot of confidence that your instructor and others will regard the sources as serious works of scholarship and as reliable databases. However, serious works of scholarship can be seriously flawed. Scholars sometimes have biases and use evidence to reach predetermined conclusions rather than drawing their conclusions from disinterested analyses of the evidence. The conclusions drawn from work that was once regarded as sound may have been altered or overturned by further discoveries. As noted earlier, it is always smart to read reviews of scholarly books or to find articles that respond to or build on earlier works and, therefore, at least implicitly review the quality of the earlier studies. Scholarly reviews provide critical appraisals of books. The reviewers give you an idea about what the book covers, and then tell you how the book relates to earlier scholarship on the subject, and finally appraise the quality of the author's argument and use of the primary evidence.

Of course, selective and reliable as it is, the campus library is no longer the only or even the principal source of information for a research project. Many of you do most of your research on the Internet, where the credibility of sources is very uncertain. If you must be cautious when assessing books in the library, you have to be much more cautious when dealing with Internet resources.

The Internet is a great city with millions of sites in it, and more sites are being added every day. However, when you arrive at most sites you cannot assume that you will find credible information there. You need to pay attention to the authority of each site—who sponsors it, how often it is updated, and so on. The addresses of some sites give you a clue to their credibility. Sites sponsored by universities or their libraries (which are in the *.edu* domain), by government institutes or agencies (*.gov*), and by well-known scientific societies (such as the American Psychological Association or the American Political Science Association, which are usually in the *.org* domain) can be taken to be credible with the same confidence—and the same caveats—as the works found in an academic library. You are reasonably safe if you stick with such sites, though the *.org* domain contains a lot of sites to be wary of. The *.org* URL extension signifies that a site belongs to a nonprofit organization; it is not an indication that an agency has accredited the organization or the site. If you want to use other sites but do not know whether they are reliable, ask a reference librarian. They know a lot about the Internet. In addition, when you open a site, ask some basic questions:

- Does the site tell you who created it and who sponsors it? What can you find out about these people or institutions? Do they have an interest or agenda of some kind that might not be suggested by their name?

- Does the site tell you how its information was collected? For example, the Constitution Society has a website that contains documents and writings pertinent to the history of constitutions, especially the U.S. Constitution. The site gives you the provenance of each document, so you know how they got it and what it represents.[2]

- How is the information on the site managed? Is it kept up to date? If it offers a database that continually changes, how can you cite it so that the reader of your paper can find the particular data you used?

One thing these caveats make clear is that assessing the quality of evidence requires that you assess the quality of the sources that contain or provide it. Remember: Research requires you to pay attention to the credibility of sources.

As you read works on your topic, you will begin to go beyond just checking the identities of the creators of databases and the purveyors of information. You will develop a capacity to judge the quality of primary sources and scholarship. By reading critically, you will sift the information and opinions on your topic and begin to form your own opinion about which primary sources are most credible and which secondary authors most persuasive. Judgment of the credibility of sources proceeds from the question, "Should I read this?" to "Do I think this source is reliable or relevant?" and "Do I agree with this author's selection and interpretation of the primary evidence?" The characteristics of critical reading constitute the topic of Chapter 2.

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2. If the site includes sources originally published in foreign languages, it may have digitized old translations because of copyright restrictions. You can get an idea of what an author was saying and then, if you wish to cite the work, search for, and compare it to, a more recent and authoritative translation in the library.