Research Survival Guide

Know Your Assignment: Is it an oral or written assignment? How long should it be? Do you need current or historical information? Do you need primary (first-hand account) or secondary (second-hand account) sources? Is the topic assigned or can you choose your own? Knowing your assignment will help determine what kind of information you need to look for.

Explore Your Topic: Get a basic overview of the subject to familiarize yourself with the history, terminology, and context surrounding the topic. Look in a high-quality encyclopedia – such as the Encyclopaedia Britannica – and do some background research on the web.

Find Books in the Libraries’ Catalog: The catalog tells you what the Libraries own – books, journals, videos, and more. Start with a keyword search, using the terms and concepts you found when exploring the topic. Use Quick Limits to refine your search. If you’re looking for something specific, search by author or title.

Find Articles in the Libraries’ Databases: Choose the subject that best matches your topic on the Libraries’ Resources by Subject web page. Many of these resources include full text articles – if not, look for the articles in the Libraries. You may need to search more than one database to find enough good articles for your assignment.

Evaluate Your Sources: Always evaluate the sources you use in your research, especially those you find on the web. Criteria to use include: currency/timeliness, opinion vs. fact, bias, intended audience, author/publisher credentials, and bibliography. Verify the information with another source if you’re not certain.

Cite Your Sources: You must cite when using another person’s words (quoting) or putting another person’s ideas into your own words (paraphrasing). Web sites must always be cited, but common knowledge and your own ideas do not need to be cited. For information on citation styles, go to libraries.stjohns.edu, and click on Citing Sources.

Ask us! Our librarians are ready to assist you with your research 7 days a week, so stop by the reference desk at the library if you need some help. If you’re not on campus, you can call us at 718-990-6727 or go to libraries.stjohns.edu/askus to submit a question and we’ll email you an answer.
Know Your Assignment: Assess Information Needs

Know Your Assignment
BEFORE YOU START your research, make sure you understand what your professor wants from you. If something is unclear, ask questions.

Quantity
For a very short assignment, you might only need one or two books, articles, or web sites. For a longer assignment you will need a larger quantity and variety of sources.

Scholarly vs. Popular
Professors generally prefer students use scholarly journals instead of popular magazines.

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<th>Scholarly Journals:</th>
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<td>Specific audience</td>
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Fact vs. Opinion
Your research should be based primarily on fact, not opinion.

- **Facts are verifiable:** “Bill O’Reilly works for Fox News.”
- **Opinions are open to argument:** “The media has a right-wing bias.”

Currency
Information for some topics becomes outdated very quickly, especially in fields such as the sciences and social sciences. In fields such as the humanities (history, theology, literature...), the publication date of the information may not matter.

Primary and Secondary Sources
A **primary source** gives a first-hand account of the subject matter. Examples include: autobiographies, artifacts, diaries, letters, newspaper articles, paintings, science experiments.

- The **strength** of primary sources is that they give you an intimate view of your subject.
- The **weakness** of primary sources is that they tend to have a narrower scope than secondary sources, they do not provide as much perspective on a subject.

A **secondary source** gives a second-hand account of the subject matter. Examples include: biographies, histories, literary criticism, movie reviews.

- The **strength** of secondary sources is that they analyze and interpret numerous sources (often including primary), and are useful for providing overview and perspective.
- The **weakness** of secondary sources is that they are prone to factual error, and may be biased by the author’s interpretation of facts.

Keep in mind that primary and secondary sources come in different formats, including interviews, photographs, paintings, video documentaries, etc. If you need to finding or citing information in a format that is not covered in this booklet, you can always AskUs! (section 9).
Explore Your Topic: Research Strategies

Understand the Assignment
Before you even begin to look for information on your topic, make sure you thoroughly understand what your professor wants from you. Read the assignment. Ask about anything that you do not understand.

Choosing a Topic
Is there a topic that particularly interests you? Maybe you can turn it into a research paper! Otherwise, here are some useful sources for topics:
- Syllabus or assignment sheet (these often include lists of ready-made topics.)
- Class notes or your textbook

Developing a Research Question
Topics assigned to you by your professor are often given in the form of a research question, which is the question you will explore about your topic. For example: “What causes Anorexia Nervosa?” A good research question helps you focus your research and develop a thesis.

To develop a research question, start by gaining a working knowledge of your topic (encyclopedias, handbooks, and dictionaries are useful for this purpose). Ask probing questions about your topic, such as: How? Why? What? Free writing and brainstorming are also useful for generating ideas.

Developing a Thesis
Your thesis is the main point you want to make about your topic and is an essential part of any research paper. An effective thesis has the following characteristics:
- Supported by evidence.
- Usually stated in a single sentence.
- Makes a specific claim.
- Arguable.
- Not factually obvious or self-evident.

Sample thesis: Anorexia nervosa has both emotional and social causes.

Formulating a Search Strategy
Recalling the section above, plan a search strategy for the types of resources you will need. Whether you are looking for books, articles, or web sites, identifying key terms and connecting them with Boolean Operators (and, or, not) will help you to be more effective in your search for resources:

- **AND** narrows a search. For example: “anorexia and causes” will find information with both of those terms.
- **OR** broadens a search. For example: “anorexia or eating disorders” will find information with either of those terms.
- **NOT** excludes terms from a search. For example: “anorexia not bulimia” will exclude information that also mentioned bulimia.
Find Books in the Libraries’ Catalog

Getting Started
To access the St. John’s University Libraries catalog:
- Go to: http://libraries.stjohns.edu.
- Click on Library Catalogs.
- Choose either Basic or Advanced Search. (Basic Search is adequate for most searches.)

Searching by Subject
To search by subject, it is usually best to begin with a keyword search. Simply enter terms that describe your topic. For example, you could enter: ethics capital punishment. Keep in mind that you may need to use alternate keyword search terms like death penalty. **Caution:** Avoid searching by subject heading unless you are familiar with the headings used for the subject you are looking for.

Searching by Author
When searching by author, place last name first. For example: Lethem, Jonathan [This would result in a list of books by Jonathan Lethem.]

Searching by Title
When searching by title, omit the initial article. For example, if you were looking for The Bluest Eye, you would enter: bluest eye [This will provide a list of matching titles.]

Locating a book on the Shelf
To find an item on the shelf, check a) Status: to see if a book is available, checked out, or missing, b) Location: e.g. 3rd North, and c) Call Number: for the exact shelf location of the book. Location, call number and status are usually included in the results list. If “multiple holdings” are indicated, click on the title for this information.

How to read Call Numbers
LC classification arranges books 1) alphabetically by the first line of the call number, 2) numerically by the second line, and 3) by the third and subsequent lines, which consist of letters and decimal numbers. For example:

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Refining your Search
Use Quick Limits to limit your search by any of the following criteria: Library Location (Queens or Staten Island), Format (books, videos, CDs...), Language, Publication Date

Finding Reserve Materials
To find items on reserve, click on the Course Reserves tab on either the Basic search page or Advanced search page, then provide your instructor’s name and course. This will provide you with location and call numbers of items on reserve.
Find Articles in the Libraries’ Databases

Definitions

- **Citation**: All the information needed to reference a specific article, including author, article title, journal title, volume number, issue number, date, and page number(s).
- **Periodical**: A journal, magazine, newspaper, newsletter, or anything else that comes out on a regular basis.
- **Database**: Search engines that help you find articles on your topic. Some databases are subject-specific, while others are general and cover many subjects.

Getting Started

To find articles, go to the St. John’s Libraries home page, at libraries.stjohns.edu. Next, choose either “Resources by Subject” or “Databases A-Z” [if you know the name of the database you want to use].

Performing a Search

When searching a database, remember that you will need to use Boolean operators (and, or, not) to perform a more effective search. (For more information on Boolean operators, see section above)

Scholarly Journals, Popular Magazines, Newspapers

Most databases will let you limit or sort your search results by type of periodical. As discussed in “Know Your Assignment” (section above), scholarly journals are usually best-suited to academic research, but other types of articles may be helpful if you know their limits for coverage on a topic: Some resources, like newspapers, are aimed at the public in general. Some magazines, like “Computers Today” may be aimed at readers who are somewhat knowledgeable on a topic. Journals, Dissertations and Professional Trade newsletters are aimed at communicating with professionals, scholars and people who already have a level of expertise.

Getting a copy of the article

Search results are usually displayed as citations and abstracts (brief summaries of articles). Is the article available full-text? If so, you can access the article from your computer! If the article is not available full text, try the following steps:
- Search for the periodical in Full-text eJournals (available on the libraries homepage.)
- Check the periodicals section of the library
- Use Interlibrary Loan (found under “Services” on the libraries homepage.)
- Ask a librarian at the reference desk or online at libraries.stjohns.edu/askus

Evaluate Your Sources

It is important to evaluate books, articles, websites and other sources of information when determining whether a resource is useful and relevant for your research

Audience

Who is the intended audience for the information being presented? Some information is aimed at the general public —and may therefore be over-simplified, to make the topic understandable in a general way. In-depth research will require that you also use scholarly material.
Authority
Who is the person – or sponsoring organization -- responsible for compiling and presenting the information? Does the author/editor have any special experience or degrees that might make them a more reliable source than someone else?

Facts, Opinions and References
As mentioned above, facts are verifiable whereas opinions can be supported by facts or can be based solely on beliefs. A research-quality resource will argue to support or reject a stated thesis by appealing mainly to verifiable facts, including citation information where appropriate.

Bias
Related to the fact/opinion assessment is the evaluation of bias. A resource might present verifiable facts in support of a thesis, yet the resource is considered biased if the authors are presenting only those facts which support their assertion, or appealing only to those authorities who are in agreement. Are contrary viewpoints and conflicting facts being addressed in your resource?

Currency / Timeliness
Evaluating factual support includes the checking on the timeliness of the facts being presented. If an argument points to demographic statistics to prove a point about immigration, the argument ought to based on the most recent information available. While some older articles about Religion or Literature may be “timeless” in what they say, it still helps to check whether a fact or textual quote that supports your thesis statement has an “historical element” that may have changed or an interpretation that may have evolved over time.

Cite Your Sources: Using Information Ethically

Citing sources is essential
In prior sections, we noted the importance of citations and references for gathering and evaluating resources; additionally, references and citations are also important for incorporating research into your work in an ethical manner. Citations let your audience know what parts of the work is yours and what parts reflect the work of others. Failure to cite sources properly is a form of dishonesty, because you are “getting credit” for the words, ideas or works of someone else.

What to Cite
References point to the resources that helped shape your work. As you find resources that you think may be useful, you will want to gather and keep track of the citation information and take notes on these resources. If you end up using a fact, argument, quote, paraphrase, idea, data/chart/graph, music, artwork, etc in your own work, you will have the information necessary to create both in-text-citations and bibliographic citations. These citations alert readers where they can find the resource for themselves. For more on whether and how to cite different types of resources, you can exercise a number of options! Consult your professor, ask a reference librarian, make an appointment at the Institute for Writing Studies, or use RefWorks software.

Using RefWorks to assist you in organizing and citing your sources:
RefWorks software can help you to keep track of your research, by enabling you 1) to build a personal database of resource citations/references [books, articles, websites, art, music, etc], and 2) to enter notes about your resources in your web-based account. Write-n-Cite software works in conjunction with RefWorks to help you to format citation information into your paper or project. Visit the Libraries’ RefWorks Page for more information on setting up a RefWorks account and accessing these applications: http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/libraries/resources/refworks/ RefWorks and Write-n-Cite Tutorials are available http://www.refworks.com/tutorial.
Queens Library Virtual Tour

4th Floor

South
- Division of Library & Information Science
- Library Science Collection
- Children and Young Adult Collection
- Special Collections, Room 408
- Classrooms 411 & 412

Center
- Media Center

North
- University Archives & Records Management
- Instructional Materials Center

3rd Floor

South
- Reference Collection
- Reference Desk
- Circulating Books A-B and H
- Systems & eServices Department, Rooms 311, 313

Center
- Library Administration, Room 322
- Preservation, Room 322
- Instructional Services, Room 304

North
- Circulating Books C-G, J-P, U-Z

2nd Floor

South
- Science Circulating Collection Q-TX
- Science Reference Collection
- Asian Collection
- Reference Art File, Room 217
- Library Development, Room 205

Center
- Circulation, Reserve, ILL

North
- Periodicals & Microforms
Queens Library Virtual Tour

1st Floor

South
- Freshman Center
- Academic Commons:
  - Group Study Rooms 1, 2, 3
  - Honors Commons/McNair/C-Step
  - Title III Office and Lab

Center
- Jazzman Café

North
- Institute for Writing Studies
- Quiet Study Area with Group Study Rooms A, B, C, D

B-Level
- Cataloging, Room B-20
- Acquisitions, Room B-18
- Serials Management, Room B-18
- Information Technology (IT), Room B-24
- Center for Technology Education (CTE) classroom B-3
- Health Education Resources Center (HERC) – entrance from outside, south end at the back of St. Augustine Hall

Photocopiery & Printers
- Photocopy Machines are available on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th floors of the library [C].
- Two photocopy machines on the 2nd and 3rd floors accept CASH.
- Printers are located on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th floors [P].
- Printers for the wireless network are located on the 2nd floor [W].
- Purchase a blank copy/print card or add value to your StormCard on the 2nd floor in the Copy Area.

7 Ask Us!

Our librarians are ready to assist you with your research 7 days a week, so stop by the reference desk at the library if you need some help. If you're not on campus, you can call us at 718-990-6727 or go to libraries.stjohns.edu/askus/ to submit a question and we'll email you an answer.

In addition to obtaining information and referral services at the St. John's Libraries' Reference Desks, you can set up a one-on-one consultation with a librarian who will advise you on effective research strategies. Each St. John's librarian has an additional subject specialty and is available to participate in your session, when needed. For further information, please contact: Prof. Lucy Heckman, (718) 990-6571