

STORYTELLING TOOLKIT



Research Tips



Smithsonian
Institution



**MUSEWEB
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This handbook will guide you in conducting research for your project.

Research can seem daunting, but when you break it down into steps, it's actually quite easy and can be fascinating! The best nonfiction narratives use first-person resources – interviews, personal letters and first-hand accounts of time periods. Many of these resources can be found in archives, so we included a little guide to finding and accessing archival material. Good luck!

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The Basics of Research

The backbone of any good story is research. If you don't understand a topic, the narrative of your story will suffer. Below are the basic steps of research.

1 Determine what topics you need to research. What information do you need to understand the story of your topic. What time period is your topic based in? What national history do you need to know to understand how your community's story fits into the larger story? Do you understand the intricacies of your topic? If your topic is a specific baseball team, do you understand the rules of the sport? Have those rules changed over the years?

2 Determine the types of information you'll need. Do you need to interview locals who have lived through an event or people who are experts on the topic? Do you need newspapers from the time period? Non-fiction books and essays on the time period and topic? Statistics from time period – on population numbers and demographics, sports scores, other numbers? What about letters and first-person accounts from the deceased?

3 Do preliminary research. First you need to understand basic facts about the time period and topic. Read *Wikipedia* entries and other overviews of the topic. The sources listed in these overview books and articles are great ones to consult for more in-depth research.

4 Narrow your research focus. Now that you have an understanding of the time period and larger themes related to your topic, it's time to focus. Find and read books on the narrow topic you've chosen. This is also when you start finding and using primary sources – newspapers from the time period, first-hand accounts of the topic, interviews with those still living who remember the events.

5 Access academic sources. If you have a university nearby, visit their library to use their resources and books. If your community has an archive or museum, ask to access any primary resources they have on your topic. The internet can also be useful for research, but it is often difficult to evaluate the validity of sources you find online. A general rule is anything from a web address ending in .edu and .gov is valid. Remember to record where you found your research, so you can properly cite your sources.

6 Evaluate your sources. Pay attention to who is making the claims in your sources and where they get their information. Are the authors stating facts or offering opinions? Are the facts supported by citations of other sources? If you can, consult as many of the original sources cited in the books you are reading. After referencing the original materials, you may have different conclusions than the author you are reading.

7 Organize your information. If you feel that you've done enough research to craft an informative and engaging narrative, organize the information you've gathered in an outline. This will give your project a form, and give you a good way to see if you have any gaps in knowledge that you need to research further.

8 Cite your sources. You need to keep track of which resources your research is coming from – titles, authors, page numbers, etc. – so you can cite your sources. Once you've finished with your project, you'll need to cite the sources you used to craft your narrative. This way you show that you are not intending to plagiarize someone else's ideas, and your audience can consult those sources to learn more about the topic.

Citing Your Sources

Citations identify a published work (e.g. book, article, chapter, web site).

Citing a source means that you show, within your project, written, audio, or video, that you took words, ideas, figures, images, etc. from another place.

Cite sources to:

- Show you've done proper research by listing sources you used
- Be a responsible scholar by giving credit to other researchers
- Avoid plagiarism by quoting words and ideas used by other authors
- Allow your reader to track down the sources you used

Citations contain:

- Author name(s)
- Titles of books, articles, and journals
- Date of publication
- Page numbers
- Volume and issue numbers (for articles)

You must cite:

- Facts, figures, ideas, or information that is not common knowledge
- Ideas, words, theories, or exact language another person published
- Another person's exact words should be quoted and cited

When in doubt, be safe and cite your source!

How to cite in a video project:

- Put citations on an endscreen of the video
- And/or put citations in the text description of the video
- When conducting interviews, always use lower third captions to identify the person being interviewed

How to cite in a audio project:

- Put citations in the text description
- If you quote someone in the story, be sure to identify who originally said that quotation
- If you use interview audio make sure they are identified either by the person introducing themselves or in the voiceover

Citation Formats:

The two citation formats most often used by humanities and history projects are MLA and Chicago Style. Visit their websites to learn how to cite sources in these styles.

- **MLA:** <https://style.mla.org>
- **Chicago Style:** <http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org>

Using Online Content

Online content can be a great help with your research. But realize not all online content is created equal. You may not always be allowed to use content you find online, depending on the user agreement under which it is published.

Licensing

When using images or videos from the internet:

- Beware of the license that is provided allows your use of it
- No licensing available does not mean it's a free for all
- There is a difference between free and unlicensed

Public Domain Content

- In general, works published after 1977 will not fall into the public domain until 70 years after the death of author
- For corporate works, anonymous works, or works for hire, 95 years from the date of publication or 120 years from the date of creation, whichever expires first.

Creative Commons Content

"Creative Commons (CC) helps you legally share your knowledge and creativity to build a more equitable, accessible, and innovative world."

- <https://creativecommons.org/> lists all the various licenses available
- Consider sharing your own work with a creative commons license

Museums and Archives

- Many Major museums have opened their collections for free and unlimited use.
- In some cases, museum content can even be used commercially.

Some of the major sources of content to consider. Some of the platforms below provide a wide variety of content.

Flickr

- Many images on this platform can be used under the Creative Commons license
- Some images have all rights reserved, so check the particular license
- Allows you to search images with a particular license only.

Vimeo

- Has videos with various licences, but uses the Creative Commons system for licensing
- Allows to filter search of videos depending cc license you need

Wikimedia Commons:

- Is the overarching organization of world's largest crowdsourced encyclopedia of content: wikipedia.
- Media of all types can be found here and can be reused based on the uploader's original licensing requirements

Google:

- Google aggregates any image they can find on the internet, with a large variety of usage rights. Not all images are available for use under all circumstances.
- Allows filtering of search depending on usage rights after initiating search

Do your due diligence : Always read the fine print of licences!

How to Use Archives

Archives exist both to preserve historic materials and to make them available for use. Learn more from *Using Archives: A Guide to Effective Research*: <http://www2.archivists.org/book/export/html/14460>.

Types of Archival Materials

Archives can hold both published and unpublished materials, and those materials can be in any format. Some examples are manuscripts, letters, photographs, moving image and sound materials, artwork, books, diaries, artifacts, and the digital equivalents of all of these things. Materials in an archive are often unique, specialized, or rare objects, meaning very few of them exist in the world, or they are the only ones of their kind.

Finding archives:

- Use Google to see if there are archives specific to your topic.
- Consult bibliographies and works cited sections in books on your topic.
- Contact experts in the field. Where did they go for their research?
- Look for websites dedicated to your topic. Do they list any archives?
- Talk to a reference librarian at your local library about accessing the WorldCat database, which includes listings for archival materials.
- Search ArchiveGrid at <http://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid>. This database contains nearly a million collection descriptions.
- Search the National Archives and Records Administration at <http://www.archives.gov>.
- Search the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov>.
- Search the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) at <http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc>.

Requesting Material:

Access policies vary among archives, but ask yourself or the archive's staff these questions to see if you can access to materials without visiting in person:

- Has the material been digitized and is it available online?
- Are the materials you want to see available through interlibrary loan?
- Are the materials you want available through libraries other than the repository at which you found them? Check WorldCat database.
- Will the archives provide scans or photocopies of the materials you wish to consult? There may be fees associated.
- Do you have a simple question that can be answered by having the archival staff view the materials on your behalf?

Visiting:

If you need to visit the archives in person, you should plan ahead for your visit:

- Inform the archival staff of the date(s) that you intend to visit and the materials you would like to see.
- Check to see whether there are any limits on the amount of materials you may request or specific request times.
- Review guidelines for using materials at the archives. Look for these to be posted on the repository website, or ask a staff member.
- Examine the reproduction policies of the archives. Regulations and fees for requesting photocopies, scans, etc. vary among archives.
- Ask whether the archives offers Internet access and accommodates personal laptop computers.
- Schedule additional time for the unexpected. Discoveries may lead you down different avenues than you had originally anticipated.

