

How to Get Your Research Rolling

1) Genealogy of a Research Paper

Always move from the broad to the narrow or the general to the specific:

- a) Decide on a general topic that interests you – the syllabus is a good place to start
 - b) Use an encyclopedia or textbook to find key works on that topic
 - c) Use these key works, especially their footnotes and bibliographies to find more specific works and primary sources
 - d) Go into the stacks to peruse books - students often fail to appreciate how wonderful a thing the Dewey Decimal system is – the libraries do a very good job in organizing your research for you
 - e) Once you have narrowed down the topic, use the library catalog, Jstor, Project Muse, Academic Search Premiere and other resources to find more materials
- 2) Develop research questions and continually refine them. Look for *why* questions not *what* questions.
- 3) One underutilized method of finding a good topic for a research paper is to use academic journals. If you want to know about the latest research in a given field and what your professors are debating and discussing amongst themselves, all you have to do is browse academic journals. This is a method best done in the stacks but can also be done through Project Muse. Using the library catalog or full-text journal site, find a few journals in a field that interests you and read backwards chronologically through their TOCs. You are almost certain to find a topic that interests you footnotes and bibliographies with (hopefully) up to date research. Many journals also devote special issues to particularly contentious topics. This is an excellent way to find an array of expert voices on a particular topic. “Annuals” are particularly good for special issues.
- 4) Look for published primary sources – print and digital – and approach primary and secondary sources differently in your thinking and writing.
- 5) Make use of my writing guide and the History Department’s.
- 6) Need more help? Choose one of the many available student-guides to researching and writing history. I recommend Jenny Presnell’s *The Information-Literate Historian*. You can see also Mary Lynn Rampolla’s *A Pocket Guide to Writing History* and Jules Benjamin’s *A Student’s Guide to History*.

7) **The Internet**

- a) Not so long ago professors like me told students to avoid the internet in their research and writing. Times have changed. Because of digitization projects and online exhibiting by an increasing number of museums, archives, and libraries, in addition to many wonderful collaborative projects by historians and history departments, students now have more opportunities to do serious research than ever before. The challenge for students (and historians) is to figure out what kind of innovative questions to ask about the material available.
- b) What is bad on the internet: Wikipedia (except for getting a general idea of a topic), personal and hobby-interest websites, anything that has not gone through some process of independent review or verification.
- c) What is good on the internet: catalogs and databases, published materials subscribed to by the library (ie encyclopedias and journals), full-text journal databases, websites maintained by museums, archives, libraries and universities. Looking for examples? Take a look at the list I compiled (focusing on Jewish history) in the Student Resources section of my website.