

Tips for Locating Secondary Sources for a Research Paper

Excerpted and adapted from Diane E. Schmidt, *Writing in Political Science*, 2nd ed., (New York: Longman Publishing, 2000).

The hard way: read everything you can find that is connected to your topic.

The easy way: let the experts guide you.

1. Look for references to your topic in the assigned and suggested readings for the course.
 - a. Note authors referenced more than once; they are probably leading scholars in the field.
 - b. Copy down the citation and note the names or sources, especially the names of the academic journals.
2. Go to the most current online indexes and abstracts (available from Penn libraries at: <http://www.library.upenn.edu/eresources/goodstartingpoints.html>).
 - a. Look for references to any of the authors from the syllabus.
 - b. Look for sources that examine topics relevant to your question.
 - c. Be sure to write down the full citation of electronic source material, especially the author/organization, title of the site, and date of access.
 - d. Spend some time navigating the website noted above; the library has compiled a lot of useful information that will undoubtedly lead you to sources you would not have otherwise found. Take advantage of what is being provided by your tuition dollars!
3. Go to the library shelves to retrieve your materials.
 - a. For books: examine the table of contents and index for each book one shelf above and one shelf below the book you came to take out.
 - i. Look for any reference to your topic.
 - ii. Keep the ones that treat your topic with more than one page.
 - b. For the journals: examine the table of contents in the previous and more current volumes of the journal you originally intended to examine; keep the articles with topics close to yours.
4. Look at the bibliographies of all the sources you have taken from the shelves or accessed online.
 - a. Note the authors and titles of materials that are used in every one or many of the books or articles. These are usually the classic publications on the topic.
 - b. Note the sources for the evidence or data used to support the author's arguments.
5. Repeat steps 2 through 4 until you have collected a rich and varied pile of resources.

Then sort and process the information that you have collected.

 - a. For the books: before reading the entire book, read a review of the book.
 - b. For articles: read the abstract if it has one. Read only the articles that suggest some information in the abstract that might be useful to your project.
 - c. For all sources: read selectively, actively, and take notes about the author's arguments, methods, and conclusions.