Writing a Paper? Try These 7 Research Tips

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Once in a while you get hit with it: the 15- to 25-page research paper, also called the term paper or semester project. This is your chance to join the community of the 20 percent or so of college professors who are actually doing research. How do they do it? And how can you? Have a look at our seven best tips for doing research like a professor:

1. Start from where you are. The professor has a research program; you have the course. Carefully consider all the assigned paper topics, trying to pick one that seems interesting to you and about which you think you'll have something to say. If the professor is requiring you to propose a topic of your own, scour all the course materials (e.g., lecture notes, readings, syllabus, handouts, discussion sections, and course bibliography) for possible topics. Then meet with the prof to see if your proposed topic is one you could actually do, given what you know and what there is to know. A bad topic will net not only weeks of frustration but a bad paper in the end.

2. Think E. Many up-to-date research materials are now available electronically. The best place to start is not with Google, Bing, or Wikipedia but with E-reserves that the professor has listed. These are found at your school library's Web page (or, sometimes, the course Web page) and have been carefully selected for relevance, level of depth, and general appropriateness for your particular course. Next stop: the electronic resources (or E-resources) at the library Web page. Usually, they are divided into more general, though still scholarly, sources (such as InfoTrac, OneFile, LexisNexis Academic, and ProQuest) and more scholarly or "academic" sources (for example, EBSCOHost, Expanded Academic ASAP, JSTOR, Periodical Contents Index, and Web of Science/Web of Knowledge). Another useful resource is the subject guide. The databases here are divided up by area—all the way from aerospace engineering up to women's studies. These can be incredibly helpful if you're just beginning to think about a topic. Columbia University's library site is an especially clear example of this.

Extra Pointer. When using E-resources, be sure to distinguish electronic databases, which are lists or directories of different journals, from E-journals, which are the actual journals or periodicals themselves (in electronic rather than print form).

5-Star Tip. Always be on the lookout for "top 10" lists of databases at your library's Web page. These have been selected by librarians based on general usefulness or on frequency of use by patrons.
3. Discover WorldCat. One of the best resources is www.worldcat.org, a free and public catalog of more than a billion (with a "b"!) items available from more than 10,000 libraries worldwide. Best of all, you don't have to leave your dorm to use it: It's available in all modalities including online and mobile (with downloadable apps for iPhone, BlackBerry, and most Web-enabled phones).

4. Learn the shortcuts. You'll have a much easier time conducting your search if you master advanced techniques. Use wild-card characters—typically a question mark (?), pound sign (#), or asterisk (*)—when you know only the first few letters of a word or when you want to find all the words that start with a certain string of letters. Use the Boolean and operator (typically AND or +) to limit the results of a search, and the or operator (OR or -) to expand the topic. And take out any apostrophes (in words such as O'Reilly) and replace foreign language characters (ç, ü) with their English equivalents (c, u).

5. Use the resources that live and breathe. If 21st-century research is already giving you a headache, make your way to the reference desk at the bricks-and-mortar library. The librarians there will be happy to help you with your electronic searches and might even walk you over to some of the (gasp!) print books. Bigger universities even have reference librarians trained in specific study areas (humanities, social sciences, business, and natural sciences, for example). Use them.

6. Learn about ILL. If, for whatever reason, your library doesn't have a particular print book and an E-book or article isn't available in some database, go to the interlibrary loan department of your library. The ILL crew will get you the physical book or a copy of the article from another library, usually free and in plenty of time for you to do your research paper (sometimes even on the same day).

7. Look for "gateway" sources. When beginning to do your research, it's often best to start with broadly conceived sources that survey the problem, area, or subject you're researching and point the way to further, more specific studies. They might have names like Cambridge Companion to X, Stanford Encyclopedia of Y, Grove Dictionary of Z, or Oxford Illustrated History of A (ask your prof or TA for names in your field). And whenever reading any source, look in the footnotes and bibliography for direction to further sources you might read.

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