

An Approach to Finding Secondary Sources for a Research Paper in English

Overview

This guide outlines one approach to finding secondary sources for a research-based scholarly paper in English. Similar approaches may work for other fields, and other approaches certainly work for English, but this is one productive approach to combining the many resources available to students conducting scholarly research in the field.

Please note what this approach does not cover: it does not address reference sources, the use of theoretical or tertiary sources, or the use of primary source texts. All of these may be appropriate or required parts of the research process for a given assignment in English.

I. Bibliographies and Citations

Start with the work that other people have done. Because bibliographies provide a spur to reading and research about a given author or field, some scholars compile bibliographies as labors of love. Others compile bibliographies as labors of labor: editors of classroom editions of texts often provide bibliographies as supplemental sections, and scholarly publications use bibliographical notes to document some of the author's own research process.

- ◆ Bibliographies in editions of your text

These are nearly always at least a little useful, and some of them are great. Be sure to check the recentness of the bibliographical research by scanning the bibliography to find the latest dates.

- ◆ Online or print bibliographies focusing on texts or authors

Many topics will not have pre-researched, topical bibliographies on which to draw, but searching for them is well worth a few minutes of your time. Do keyword searches in the library catalog and in an internet search engine for “bibliography” and your author or topic.

- ◆ Works Cited lists or bibliographical notes in recent articles or books

Here the process becomes less formal and more exploratory. Start with a small number of sources chosen for their topicality and recentness. Find the most recent books on your topic held by the library, for instance, or articles in the Project Muse database, which contains more current sources than most others. Use book introductions and articles to glean whatever information you can about other works related to your interests. Look especially for indications of special importance, as in the works called “foundational” or “groundbreaking” or “classic.”

◆ Companion volumes

Cambridge, Oxford, Blackwell, Routledge, and other publishers are rapidly producing books called companions or guides to literary authors and periods. These guides provide bibliographies that are often useful.

◆ MLA bibliography (part of the Literature Resource Center)

By far the most general and comprehensive of these sources, the MLA bibliography has the advantage and disadvantage that it does not attempt to interpret or rank the texts it describes. Whereas the first three approaches here involve capitalizing on the insights and preferences of other scholars, searching the MLA bibliography may help you find lesser-known sources that may nonetheless have special relevance to your project. For the same reasons, you may also want to try Google Scholar or Google Books. If you access the MLA bibliography or Google Scholar from a computer on the campus network, the search results will sometimes provide handy links to resources the library owns.

II. Keystones

Keystone texts—older works that have become the enduring basis for discussions of your topic—provide two benefits to your research process. The first involves the sources themselves: if a work has structured the critical discourse addressing your topic, why, you should read that work. The second is subtler: a keystone text can become a search term in full-text databases, allowing you to construct a genealogy of the keystone text's scholarly descendants.

◆ Keystones in recent articles or books

This step is an extension of the step described above that involves searching recent scholarship for references to earlier works called “foundational” or “groundbreaking” or “classic.” At this point, you can look more generally for the earliest critical sources quoted in recent scholarly works and bibliographies. For example, if you find that a work published in 1964 is the only pre-1980 source cited in three recent articles, you have likely found a keystone.

◆ Keystones as full-text database search terms

When you discover keystones, note the author names or title phrases for later use as full-text database search terms. This step will only work for full-text sources, including some of the databases of articles and Google Books.

III. Library catalogs

Library catalogs are gaining flexibility and power almost by the minute, but finding books remains their best function.

◆ The College library catalog

Searching the Grinnell library catalog might be the easiest and most obvious step in the research process, but some people neglect it and concentrate on journal articles instead. In the humanities, you *must* look for books as well as articles. Top scholars in the humanities publish articles, but the fullest versions of their arguments usually find their way into books. In fact, many scholars deliberately withhold some of their best ideas from article publication to be sure that book proposals retain enough original material to attract the interest of publishers. Because the library catalog includes chapter titles for recent books, keyword searching has become a much more powerful tool.

◆ The College library shelves

Browsing the library shelves is a time-honored method for book searching that still functions as a useful supplement to electronic searches. Look up a book that addresses your topic as precisely as possible, then go to the stacks and see what other books occupy the nearby space. This technique lets the Library of Congress classification system do some of your work for you. Eyeballing the books achieves the best results, but if you are off campus, you can also imitate this approach electronically by clicking on any call number in the catalog. The resulting page will show you the titles of surrounding books.

◆ WorldCat

To find books not held at the Grinnell library, search WorldCat, then use the results to place Inter-Library Loan requests.

IV. Databases

This process ends where many students begin, with searches of databases that contain or link to the full text of scholarly articles. If you follow this process, you will get to these resources with a sense of context for what you see. Even the most complete full-text databases will provide access to only a fraction of the resources that may address the concerns of your project.

The following databases are among the most useful for research in English literature.

◆ JSTOR

JSTOR is a multidisciplinary database of several hundred full-text journals; its archives usually do not include the most recent two to five years of each journal's contents.

◆ Project Muse

Another multidisciplinary database, Project Muse is valuable for the recentness of its materials, though not for breadth. It includes a fraction of the titles of other databases.

◆ Humanities International Complete

A relatively recent and valuable addition to the library's holdings, Humanities International Complete includes more than 730 full-text journals in the humanities, with varying date ranges.

◆ Academic Search Premiere (also called EBSCO Host)

A large multidisciplinary database with 4600 full-text titles, Academic Search Premiere can be search simultaneously (through the same interface) with Humanities International Complete—as well as Historical Abstracts, which is useful for some literary topics.

◆ Google Scholar

Google Scholar will generally return a big pile of results with widely varying relevance to your search.

◆ Google Books

Google Books has the advantage of allowing full-text searching of a great many books, though your view of the results is generally limited to certain parts of the book, snippets of text, or no direct view at all. Google Books is especially good for finding commentary on a specific phrase that you wish to track down.

◆ Literature Online (LION)

Along with extensive holdings of primary sources, LION contains a Criticism & Reference search function that is worth trying alongside some of the tools listed above. LION does include some full-text sources, though they are formatted strangely, sometimes without page numbers.