

Introduction to Traditional Research Sources
(Print Media Reference Works, Books, Periodical, Bibliographies, Indexes and
Personal Interviews)

Introduction

With all of the advances in technology and varying types of media available for research and information gathering many so-called experts are predicting the day will come when libraries no longer have printed books as the foundation of their collections. This thinking is probably misguided at best. The most recent example of this trend in “pop” research methodology was the new California State University at Monterey Bay. Billed as a model for the new researcher, the library had almost no print volumes when it opened. However, since then they have been buying books by the thousands as they discovered that everything isn’t available online; or, even if it is available, the cost for access is too extreme.

The Basic Research Model

In the basic research model the student will move from broad to narrow, or to use a shooting analogy, you will start with a shotgun and move to a sniper rifle. The important thing in approaching your research is to have a plan. As noted in the *Craft of Research*:

A riskier moment is when you know where the sources are, plunge in without a plan, and find yourself lost in a thicket of information. Sources can lead you anywhere and everywhere, so it is easy to lost yourself wandering from one lead to another. There’s nothing wrong with aimless browsing . . .unfortunately, you can’t rely on chance to produce good research.¹

After determining your topic or area of study you will proceed with this model for research:

Step One: Examination of:

Reference Works (Encyclopedias, Dictionaries, Lexicons, Reference Grammars)²

In these materials you will find:

- Broad Concepts and Context
- Definitions and Overviews
- Foundational Bibliography

Use this bibliography to lead you to:

¹ Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 64.

² Reference Works will generally have the least “currency” that is the research that under girds articles in reference works is the oldest. For example, I wrote a number of articles for the new edition of the *Eerdman’s Dictionary of the Bible*. The finished product was published in 2000; however, all of the articles I wrote had been completed in 1997 to meet the editorial deadline.

Step Two: Examination of:

Books or Monographs³

In these materials you will find:

- Specific Concepts
- Narrow Argumentation
- Specialized Bibliography

Use this bibliography to lead you to:

Step Three: Examination of:

Periodical Literature⁴

In these materials you will find:

- Singular Concepts
- Pin-point Argumentations
- Single-subject Bibliography

Use this bibliography to lead you to anything you may have missed ☺

Along the way you not only gain additional bibliographic material, but you will begin to focus on the conceptual issues of your topic, examine the significant people and events in the history surrounding your topic, and gain increasing fluency with the arguments on all sides of the issues.

Other Resources:

Multi-Author Works (MAWS) or *Festschriften*

A specialized category of works is that of the “Multi-Author Work.” These are books that contain collection of articles. Generally, Multi-Author Works and *Festschriften* (a collection of essays produced in honor of an individual) will have a loose thematic thread. They may be a collection of papers from an annual or regional conference or something particularly created around a theme. However, in the case of a *Festschriften* they may not have anything more in common than the having to do with the particular interests of the person being honored. From the standard of usefulness they are still little more than a collection of periodical type articles made into book chapters. There is often good material here, but often obscured by the fact that publishers don’t give a lot of publicity to them (especially *Festschriften*) and they often have very limited press runs.

A true multi-author work with a specific theme and some logical sequence to the articles will often provide good material for the researcher, but they still are generally at the same level as a journal article.

³ Books or Monographs will usually have better “currency” than Reference Works. Normally, the time of writing to that of publishing will be about 2-3 years (unless it is a work by a more popular author or the publisher put a “rush” on the schedule to capitalize on current events or other factors).

⁴ Periodical Literature maintains the best balance between currency and thoroughness. An article may appear in print from 6 to 18 months from the original research and it has normally had the benefit of some editorial work and peer review before it has been published. Periodical literature should form the cornerstone of a student’s research.

Theses, Dissertations and other Unpublished Materials

This type of material is similar in both format and scope as Books or Monographs. Theses and dissertations are often good sources of information, depending of course on the relative skill of the student who produced the work. Both of these types of material should normally be used to supplement argumentation, not as primary points. Unpublished materials should generally be used with even greater care.

Society Papers

This type of material is similar to Periodical Literature in both scope and format, and, quite often these works will find their way into that genre. Society papers can be called “raw” articles in that the purpose of reading them at a society meeting will be to present an idea and obtain feedback from experts and peers in the field. Usually these papers will not have a formal bibliography and the research must be culled out of the footnotes. Many society papers are either published in an annual collection (e.g., *The Society of Biblical Literature*) or are gathered together in microfiche (e.g., *The Theological Research Exchange Network* or TREN) or other online media (e.g., a society web page). See the Research Bibliography for additional examples.

Book Reviews

Book reviews are often wonderful sources of information and insight. There will not normally be any significant bibliographic information here, but they will bring currency of thought to a critical evaluation of a book. They have the advantage of opening new avenues of thought or critique that you may not have considered. They are often highly quotable, as reviews by nature must be written with great economy of space. See the section on *Book Reviews* in this syllabus for additional information.

Bibliographies and Indexes

Bibliographies are literally “a book of books.” As noted in the *Research Bibliography* they are collection of works on a single theme or topic. There are bibliographies on every type of topic, some broad, and some amazing specialized.

An index typically is a listing of periodical material from either a single group or interest (e.g., *The Catholic Periodical Index*) or a single publication (e.g., the Ten-Year index of *The Master’s Seminary Journal*). They are helpful to find articles on topics by subject matter, or, depending on the detail of the index, a particular author or even a Scripture passage.

The danger here is that the student will simply jump into the bibliography, gather the resources listed there and proceed to the writing stage as though they have actually done all the research. Students must avoid this temptation. Bibliographies and indexes are the final stop they are the dessert of research not the meal. They are used to supplement and finalize the research. Here are some warnings:

- Compilers of Bibliographies have their own set of prejudices and often agendas. They may purposely leave out important material or slant their entries simply because they don’t agree with a particular author and his work. For example here see my review in *TMSJ* 12:1 (Spring 2001), 113-15.
- Even the most conscientious bibliographer will not possibly list everything that is either helpful or relevant. When a bibliography is consulted, several should be compared.
- Bibliographies by their very nature are not current. If it takes 1-2 years to prepare a bibliography for print, it is at least that far behind on current research.

Indexes do not suffer from the same type of problems as bibliographies. They are generally a thorough and complete reference of what appeared in the periodical(s) being indexed. The key here is to remember that even broadly based indexing tools (e.g., *Religion Index One* and *Two* or *Elenchius*) do not index every available. Check in the front part of the index to examine a listing of the journals that are indexed in a particular work.

Interviews and Oral Histories

One almost entirely neglected aspect of research is the personal interview or oral history. You may be researching a topic where some of the most significant individuals related to that topic are still alive and may be available to interview personally. Or you may be researching a topic of historical interest where one or more of the key individuals are still alive or one of the key researchers on the subject is still alive. When this is the case it is entirely appropriate to arrange for an interview.

An interview may be conducted in person, on the phone or even through an e-mail exchange. If you decide that an interview would be helpful to your research here are some things to keep in mind:

- A personal interview is obviously the best way to go. Individuals can usually be located via the institutions where they teach or taught at before they retired or the church or denomination that they were associated with.

In the personal interview here are some reminders of etiquette:

- Make the initial arrangement for an interview via a letter or a message to a secretary. Cold calling your prospective interviewee will likely result in a decline. They don't have their schedule or calendar with them and you have caught them unprepared. Sometimes a letter of introduction or recommendation from your professor will help smooth the way.
- Be familiar with their written works on the subject at hand. Don't ask questions that will make it clear that you have not really read their works. You are trying to gather new and additional insight and information, not to have the author of a book give you a personal reading. Know as much about this person and their works as possible before you go to see them.
- If you arrange for a personal interview send the individual a listing of the points or questions that you would like to raise or discuss. Ask permission ahead of time to use a recording device (this will save the embarrassment of having them ask you not to record the conversation if they are uncomfortable with that and it will prepare you to be ready to take notes as needed).
- At the interview be punctual both in arriving and leaving. Set a specific amount of time and then be sure to offer to leave at the appointed time. They may well ask you to remain, but give them the choice, don't force them to end the interview. Remember, they are doing you a favor, they don't have to do this!
- If you come across something notable that you think you might want to quote in your research, be sure to read it back to your subject and make sure they agree that you have captured their words correctly. Offer to send them a printed copy of the material and quotations you might use so they can approve it.
- Dress well and appropriately. There are two things at work here: you are on a business trip and should dress appropriately and you are representing The Master's Seminary to this individual.

If you are doing the interview by phone the same basic rules as above apply. Be certain that you ask permission to record the conversation and then remind them again of that fact before you start. An e-mail exchange can be

a little freer in terms of the format as they can cut off the exchange any time they choose. But above all in any of the situations be polite and respectful, you are representing Christ and the seminary.

When the interview is complete, be certain to send a personal letter of thanks for their time and when the research project is complete, be certain to send a copy of the finished product to your subject.