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Chapter 01 - The Research Process & Scholarly Communication

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The Research Process & Scholarly Communication

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If you ask five different people what research is, you'll likely get five different answers. If you ask those people to define scholarly communication, you'll likely get a lot of blank looks in response. This chapter intends to give you and your fellow students an introduction to both, and an explanation how you, as a student, fit in the scholarly communication cycle.

The Association of College and Research Libraries defines scholarly communication as "...the system through which research and other scholarly writings are created, evaluated for quality, disseminated to the scholarly community, and preserved for future use" (ACRL, 2003). While the most easily recognizable and high profile form of scholarly communication is the research articles found in peer-reviewed journals, works that do not go through the traditional publication route can still be a part of the scholarly communication process. These informal channels of communication can include student research, the various kinds of gray literature such as technical reports, and bibliographies, as well as listserv discussions. Whether the result is a widely distributed scholarly article or a student paper, research and scholarly communication are closely tied together.

So, what is research? Research is a complex, iterative process that starts with an open-ended question, called an inquiry question, and results in learning something new. True research isn't about proving something you may already know, nor is it about just gathering a bunch of information on a topic. It isn't always easy, but you will find yourself learning new skills both within the library and without. It is a process that will take practice, as does many things you may wish to get better at, and will serve you well as you become proficient. Nor is it a quick process, iterative processes such as these usually aren't. You may find yourself coming back to your question again and again, finding sub-questions that need to be addressed, following different branches of inquiry, looking at different sources and different perspectives, collecting new data and information before finally interpreting it in your final output of choice (or, perhaps, your professor's choice).

As you embark upon research, you'll find that your starting point is your question – your inquiry question. This question will determine many things as you move forward, from what search terms you use to what databases

you work with. Keeping this in mind, it is good practice to select a topic that you find interesting. As simplistic as this may seem, consider this: that required course in a discipline outside your major that is of little interest to you but has a research project. Is there a topic in the news related to the assigned project that you're following closely? Or is there a way you can relate the assigned research back to your area of study? Methods like these can turn an unappreciated task into something that you're invested in and less likely to procrastinate on.

> ### Did you know?
>
> An inquiry question should be:
>
> - Arguable
> - Complex
> - Specific in language
> - Clear and concise

What are some likely starting points? Check out the newspapers and magazines in the Daylight Lounge in Wilson Library. Look at the headlines of local, national, or international papers – from the [Bellingham Herald](#), to [The New York Times](#) or [The Guardian](#). Perhaps the search will need to go online: Chapter Four: OneSearch of this text can be used to find popular or trade sources that you can use as starting points to determine your question. Or you can utilize Chapter Six Web Literacy to help you look beyond the library catalog and use Google or other search engines to find your topic.

As you start your research, keep in mind that you're working through a question – not try trying to prove something you already know. It's also a good idea to keep your initial inquiry question broad. Should you turn out to be that lucky researcher who hits the motherlode of data and information, then you can focus down to a stricter path of inquiry. Starting with a very narrow question may limit the data you can find to answer it. Also, make sure that your question is clear. [Are there hidden ambiguities in the question](#)?

> ### Inspiration without Perspiration:
> ### Other Places to look for Ideas
>
> - [The Lexis-Nexis Academic "Hot Topics" List](#)
> - [Digital Commons Network](#)
> - Headlines of your favorite newspaper
> - Your favorite [blog](#) or [vlog](#)
> - Head to the Public Library
> - [Other Sources for Inspiration](#)

There are some things to keep in mind as you utilize popular and trade sources to determine a topic and commence background reading (the best way to ensure you thoroughly understand the topic and the question you are asking). Instructors often place requirements on the type of sources used in a research project. Check your assignment sheet or syllabus to see whether or not you're allowed to use these, or if they just are something you pull your starting topic from. As well, another thing to keep in mind is the rate of scholarly discourse. While the internet age has sped many things up, scholarly writing and publishing isn't one of them. If the assignment in question requires primarily scholarly, peer-reviewed articles, yesterday's breaking news may not be your best bet.

With your question in place and background readings handy, you may quickly find that you need to follow different paths of research. These sub-questions branch off from your main inquiry question, helping you focus in different areas and to create a broader understanding of the question as a whole. This is part of what makes research an iterative process. As you start heading down one path of inquiry, new questions and sub-questions will be raised. These may lead you in different directions at first, but often you'll find the information you uncover brings you back to your original path. But also open up new paths. It is your job, as a researcher, to take all of the relevant information you discover and interpret it as a whole, rather than the individual parts.

Selecting a topic, writing and inquiry question, and finding background information is the first of four steps in

the research process model as taught here at Western Libraries. This first step, **Getting Started**, is the inspiration and gathering stage of the process. This is the point where you may also wish to make some additional decisions before moving forward with your project. Do you wish to use a citation manager to help organize your sources and notes? It's easier to start now than play catch-up later. Do you use news alerts or reading apps? Now is the time to add searches to monitor your topic to help keep up-to-date on new and timely information.

This is also the time to ensure that you truly understand the assignment and its requirements. Take advantage of your professor's office hours if you need. Taking the time now prevents an unexpected revision of the paper or project at the last minute. Now is also the time to find the resources on campus that you can utilize. Western Libraries is filled with subject specialists who can help you if the topic you're delving into is new to you or if you're having difficulty with your searches. And check out the subject guides they have created while you're at it, these guides are compilations of information, databases, sources and other tips related to different subjects. And the Hacherl Research & Writing Studio at Western Libraries is a great resource as you start your research, with space to work in and experts on research and writing to guide you through any difficulties.

As you move past the **Getting Started** stage, you're in the **Explore** stage. This is where you're going to dive more deeply into your topic. Turn your topic into an inquiry question if you have been holding off. Look beyond your usual resources to broaden your perspective. You may find yourself needing to tweak the news alerts you set up earlier – perhaps you've found a hole in your area of research. Or, perhaps, you've found something that has interested you in taking it in another direction. This is the time where you will want to look in as many and as varied sources as you can. Don't just depend on popular and trade magazines and newspapers at this point. Now is when you want to utilize what Chapter Four teaches you about OneSearch, and look for monographs, journal articles, and other scholarly materials. Use Chapter Five to learn how to navigate article databases, and to look for scholarly articles. Is your topic related to health, agriculture, the environment, or the U.S. government? Then you'll want Chapter Seven under your belt as you explore government sources. You may find yourself turning to historical materials, which will make Chapter Eight, a discussion of the Western Libraries Heritage Resources, an important tool. Over all, this stage is about exploring your topic in a variety of way and this textbook is built to guide you through that process.

This is also the time you want to sit down and make your research plan. To avoid the last minute assignment blues, a research-writing plan can keep you on task throughout the process of your assignment. Use your deadline as the starting point – that is your hard cut-off for when the assignment is due. Then work backwards. How much time do you think you need for editing and revision? Create a self-imposed due date; your first draft will need to be done by then. How much time will you need to write that first draft? That will be an even earlier self-imposed deadline. Follow this backwards, giving yourself deadlines for the different milestones of the process. Remember to incorporate any deadlines that your professor may have given you as well. It isn't uncommon to require an annotated bibliography, for example, as a way to ensure that students are keeping on task.

With a plan in place, it's time to **Focus**. At this point, you have your inquiry question and your background research. You know what deadlines you need to hit to keep on task. You've even met with your subject specialist and scoped out the Hacherl Research & Writing Studio. You've thought about finding and evaluating information sources in Chapter Three, and know what databases and keywords you want to use. Now is the time to delve into gathering information and evidence for your project. This is where you want to evaluate your sources. Are they biased? How credible are they? It is very likely you'll find yourself doing a little research on your sources. But don't turn away from those news and current research alerts you set up early on. There is always the possibility of an amazing new resource showing up on the horizon. Do you want to be the one to find it? Or do you want to depend

on your professor pointing it out on the rough draft you turned in?

This is where the rough draft starts to take form. You'll need to think about how you're using each resource. At this point integrating the information into one cohesive output is key. It is one thing to regurgitate the information presented in that scholarly article you just read. But integrating it key historical information or government data elevates the discussion and help improve the flow of your writing.

The final step is **Finalize**. This is the home stretch, and a good research plan makes the difference between a good research project and a great one. There's more to this than just revising and editing your project, though that is an incredibly important step. This is where you want to take a look at the resources you've used, from the journal articles to the historical materials to the government documents. Is there something missing? Do these materials support your thesis and conclusion in a nuanced and effective manner? Hopefully you've been working on your citations as you go with a citation manager. If you haven't, now is the time to build your reference page and check your citations. Even if you have been using Zotero, the citations provided by databases, or other citation builders, now is the time to use the Citation Guides to double check everything. Proofreading and revising are a part of this step. Set your project text aside for a bit while you're working on the citations so you can go back to it with fresh eyes. Work with the Hacherl Research & Writing Studio to develop techniques to help analyze the flow and style of the text. This is your last opportunity to catch errors, whether they're organizational or grammatical.

Chapter Conclusion: Why is this important to you?

Understanding what scholarly communication is and where research fits in will help you understand the importance of learning the research process. Understanding the different stages of the research process will help you understand how to approach research projects. Often when research and writing projects are assigned, they seem to be overwhelming, daunting tasks. With a good research plan, you can break that project into smaller, easier to handle tasks that will allow you to spread your work across the quarter – instead of leaving it to the last minute.

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