

## Research Roadblock: Getting Unstuck in the Archives

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Have you settled on a research topic and located a few primary sources but don't know what to do next? Here are some basic tips to consider when feeling overwhelmed by archival research.

**Ask an expert.** Get feedback from your professor or someone else who knows a lot about your topic. They may be able to steer you in the right direction.

**Talk to a librarian or archivist.** These people are paid to help you with your research and might know about a really great source that would improve your paper.

**Be flexible.** Don't be overly fixated on finding materials to support the topic you came up with. Sometimes it's better to formulate a research project based on the sources that you have access to. In other words, let the available sources suggest a topic.

**Ask questions.** When you just can't figure out what to do with a source, make a list of questions that you would like to know the answer to. Try to find the answers and see if they provide clarity about your research topic and/or another direction to go in.

**Brainstorm.** Sit down with a blank sheet of paper and quickly write down every idea that comes to mind, no matter how stupid it may sound. After ten or fifteen minutes, scratch out the worst ideas and try to develop the rest into something that you can use.

**Find more primary sources.** If you have enough documents to work with, it is rare that you cannot weave them into some sort of story. But if there simply aren't enough sources, you might need to change your topic.

**Find more secondary sources.** You should already have looked at scholarly books and articles to help you tie your sources/ideas into a larger concept, but if you're really stuck, keep looking. (Tip: see the notes and bibliographies in these kinds of publications to get ideas for additional sources.)

**Understand the debate.** Read a variety of secondary sources and summarize any different points of view, interpretations, controversies, etc., that you find. Do your primary sources support or refute any aspects of that debate? Do they add anything new to it?

**Seek out a variety of primary source formats.** Books, manuscripts, photographs, newspapers, magazines, maps, ephemera, artwork, music, recordings, oral histories, government documents, statistics, the physical environment, and even your personal experiences... there is a wide array of primary sources that you can use to tell a story. Sometimes an "alternative" source is exactly what you need to help you see things from a different angle and move forward with your writing.

**Connect the dots.** As you look through the sources, keep an open mind and look for ways that documents might be related.

**Don't read every document word for word.** At least not at first. Look through all of your documents quickly to form a general impression of what's there. Then go back and zero in on documents that stand out.

**Look left, look right.** Historical events never exist in isolation. If you have hit a roadblock, it might be helpful to ask questions like: What led up to this event? What consequences did it have? What else was happening at the same time? Did local events relate to events elsewhere?

**Think outside the box.** Depending on what context you view a primary source in, it may have more than one story to tell. For example, if you were to give the same exact source to a historian, a literary scholar, an artist, a psychologist, and a scientist, they would all probably have different opinions about its significance. Try imagining that you are working in a different discipline. That may provide new insight and a way around a research roadblock.

**Pick a new audience.** Most of us find it easier to tell stories to one group of people versus another. If you struggle with writing in an academic style, try this: Imagine you are telling a story to a friend or family member, or to a group of children, or are writing a short newspaper article. That might help you decide what your basic points are. You can then flesh out the story in a more formal style of writing with supporting evidence based on primary sources.

**Read a book review.** Find a review of a book related to your research topic. Reviews frequently raise questions about the subject and/or suggest topics for further study.

**Take a break.** Putting your research away for a few hours or a few days can often help you see the direction in which you need to go.

**Delete and rewrite.** Even great writers take wrong turns. If something really isn't working, cut it out and start again.

**Admit failure.** There is no shame in giving up. Sometimes the best thing to do is look for a new topic.

**Pick a topic that excites you.** People who write papers on topics that they aren't interested in usually write pretty bad papers (and torture themselves in the process). Even if you don't really care about the time period of your course, find a subject, theme, person, event, object, etc., from that time period that is meaningful to you. That may not make the research easier, but you will be less likely to give up – and you will definitely have more fun.

#### **Further reading:**

William Cronon, "Learning to Do Historical Research" (<http://www.williamcronon.net/researching>)