

# TIPS on How to

**Define your topic focus.** Write down your research topic in a clear descriptive sentence. Don't try to research a huge topic, such as the Civil War. Instead, limit your topic by dates, locale, individuals/organizations, specific activities or events, or similar factors. Ask yourself the journalist's six key questions (who, what, where, why, when, and how) about your topic. If your topic is too broad, you will invest years in your research and visit most archives in the U.S. If your research is focused too narrowly, you will soon exhaust all the information on your topic. Think of your topic as question(s) that you try to answer by locating the best and most relevant evidence.

**Read extensively about your topic in reputable published sources.** Ask your local university reference librarian/bibliographer to help you identify reputable published sources on your topic. Use the sources listed in the provided book's bibliographies to find further reading. Read widely on your topic from a range of viewpoints and sources. Read book reviews in scholarly journals to see what books are respected. Check the various indexing, abstracting, and citation services (*Book Review Index*, *Humanities Citation Index*). Keep a list of sources cited in these publications. Use *Who's Who* volumes and biographies to begin researching individuals. Keep a list of major organizations, groups, and individuals associated with your topic. Branch out to discover the major individuals and organizations in their lives. To find all the letters written to your key individuals, about them, and by them, you will need to research the personal papers of all these individuals and the archives of their organizations.

**Check all research sources, particularly the World Wide Web.** Use critical thinking to check the source's accuracy, authority, completeness of coverage, documentation, objectivity, and timeliness. Be a skeptical and critical reader.

**Refine your topic focus.** Rewrite your basic research statement to be more precise. Develop a series of the questions you must answer. Indicate what will be covered in terms of an era, the geographic area, key people and organizations involved, trends, activities and events to be documented, and alternative names of events (e.g., Civil War, War Between the States, etc.). Pay particular attention to including the full names of

individuals, groups, and organizations that you will research and any alternate names they might have had (e.g., pseudonyms, married names, corporate name changes). Identify the types of documents you will use to answer your questions (diaries? films? correspondence? architectural drawings? photographs?) Once written, set your research statement aside. Reread it a week later to see if it still makes sense. Make any necessary revisions. Add to your list of questions to be answered during your research. Show your questions and research statements to your peers for review. Incorporate their comments. Refine your research statement.

**Check reference sources to find out what archives or libraries hold the collections you wish to use.** First check "Ready, 'Net, Go" on the Web at <<http://www.tulane.edu/~lmiller/Archives/Resources.html>>. Check with your local university librarians by showing them your research statement. Ask them to check the Research Library Information Network (RLIN) which contains the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collection* within its database <<http://lcweb.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/nucmc.html>>. Consult the *National Inventory of Documentary Sources* (on CD-ROM and by subscription on the Web), *Archives USA* <<http://archives.chadwyck.com/>>; *National Register of Microfilm Masters, and Microforms in Print*. If working with photographs, search the *Index to American Photographic Collections* a database and book created by the International Museum of Photography/ Rochester Institute of Technology. If working with motion picture films, ask to consult the American Film Institute's *National Moving Image Database*. Check published sources, such as: 1) *Directory of Archives and Manuscript Repositories in the U.S.* (included in *Archives, USA*); 2) *American Library Directory* (New York: R.R. Bowker, annually); *Subject Collections: A Guide to Special Book Collections and Subject Emphases....* (R.R. Bowker Co. annually). Check guides, such as the *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States*, Washington, DC: NARA, 1995.

**Contact the appropriate archives.** Ask them for their access and usage policies; days and hours of operation; availability of microform or digital copies of the collections you wish to view; availability of finding aids; the sizes of the collections you are interested in; and duplication and publi-

# Research in an Archives

cation policies and procedures. Talk to the staff. Find out how much research you can do from a remote locale using collections published as books, microfilm publications, World Wide Web site content, or CD-ROMs. Some archives, like the Archives of American Art, have an extensive microfilm publication program to facilitate research nationwide. Fill out any researcher registration forms, duplication request forms, and similar paperwork sent to you and return them. Read the access and usage policies and procedures carefully. Plan your research travel on a map, going to the most likely archives first. Find funding. Note: The Foundation Center can help you find funding for individual research efforts. (See CRM 18:4 (1995) p.9-13.)

**Get oriented at the archives.** Meet the staff, particularly the reference archivist and any staff members with expertise on your topic. Show the archivists your research statement. Talk to the reference staff extensively about what collections they think will be most fruitful on your topic. Tell them how long you can stay and what final product (film, report, article, book) you expect to produce. See if the reference staff is aware of any related or similar collections at other archives. Learn the necessary logistical information, such as where you must park; what you can take into the reading room; where to check your coat, hat, briefcase, and other paraphernalia; how and when to sign in and out; what their handling policies are; how to request collections; what fees are charged for duplication services; how to obtain permission to publish an item; how to request duplicates of an item; and where to locate the finding aids. Learn when the research room will be crowded.

**Work systematically with the identified archival collections.** Wash your hands before entering the archives to limit the amount of oil transferred to the records. Use only pencil or computer to take notes in the reading room, not ink pens. Never place your writing pad or paper directly on an original document or folder. Don't scan, xerographically copy, or photograph items without permission. Never smoke, eat, or drink in the reading room. Remove a folder from the box, look through the documents in the folder from front to back, then replace it in the same position in the box before going on to the next folder. If an item seems fragile, avoid handling it. Wear gloves when requested to do so, such as

when working with photographs or film. Follow any required procedures for special format materials, such as oversize materials, friable (e.g., chalk, charcoal) media, sound recordings, motion pictures, and videotape. Don't touch the surface of photographic images. Handle documents carefully by opposing edges, or use a stiff piece of board to support weak documents when turning them over. Alert reference staff about any badly deteriorated ripped, torn, missing, vandalized, or damaged items. Never rearrange materials. If an item looks out of order, alert the staff—don't move it. Never remove an item from a folder for duplication; instead use a separate sheet of blank paper as a flag to make it easy for staff to locate the item and photocopy it. Take clear and complete notes about what you discover, including the collection name and catalog/accession number, box number, and folder number, and a brief description (creator, document type, and synopsis) of each important document you may wish to use. Tell the reference archivist if he/she may alert other researchers to the topic you are working upon so as to avoid duplication of scholarly effort.

**When your archival research is done.** Thank the staff who helped you. Ensure that you have paid for and received all your duplication orders or that you have paid and left a shipping address for all materials to be sent to you. If the latter is the case, reconfirm your order and the credit lines and captions of your duplicated items. Ensure that you know of any restrictions on publishing items that you have duplicated, including copyrights, privacy and publicity legislation restrictions, and ethical and cultural sensitivities. (See CRM 18:9 (1995) pp. 23-26.) Obtain any necessary permissions **before** you leave, while you still remember what it is you want to publish. While writing up your research findings, remember to use appropriate credit lines, captions, and citations as required by the archives. When writing, be conscious of your responsibility to avoid plagiarism and to properly credit sources. After publication, remember to send two or more copies of the completed work to the archives. Thank the archival staff for their assistance in your acknowledgements. If you receive special assistance or outstanding service, write a special letter of thanks to that individual and/or the head of the archives.

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