

Basic Research Methods

Step 1: Framing Historical Questions

Conduct research in secondary and tertiary resources such as books and journal articles to get a good grounding in the topic and what sorts of research has been done already. Then start to think about what you want to know more about.

Journal databases are often available at college and university libraries. Check with the reference librarians at the library for more information about accessing these databases, or about using periodical indexes to locate articles on your topic.

Narrow your focus

Remember to keep the larger historical context in mind when framing your questions, but don't be too general. How much time and space do you have to complete your research and final project? A good way to narrow is to look at the real goal of your project. Are you interested in completing a comprehensive history? Are you interested in uncovering the local significance of a national or worldwide event? Or are you interested in illuminating a smaller event or group of people?

Step 2: Identifying Sources

Use the secondary research to help. Read other historians bibliographies and look at where they found their resources.

Make note of who participated in the event. Were there specific individuals, government agencies, corporations or organizations involved?

Also make a note of where and when the events took place.

Answering these questions will make it easier to determine which repositories may have information on your topic and which will not. Understand that most repositories have specific collecting policies that govern what sorts of materials they will have in their holdings.

Step 3: Evaluating Records

When you are reviewing the materials associated with your research topic, constantly ask yourself, how does this relate to my original question about this event? Note any new questions that the material raises. Does the material give evidence that other people, agencies or organizations were involved?

Research is all about the questions raised and following new questions in the same manner to create a body of evidence to support your answer to your original question.

National Archives and Records Administration
Pacific Region (Laguna Niguel)

Step 4: Context

Remember to always keep the documents in context. Individual records can often be graphically interesting, but the purpose of creating a body of evidence is to support the larger historical context and in the end assist you with applying the national and local education standards.

Step 5: Citations

Most institutions will tell you how they want their records cited. Many finding aids will have the collection citation listed. Citing records is extremely important! If you do not know where the document came from, then it loses its significance. Good historical research can be retraced.

Also remember when using materials from a repository that different institutions have different use policies and you should contact that institution to discuss using documents from their holdings.