

Literary Research: A Step by Step Guide

Read.

Before you begin, it is essential that you have carefully and entirely read the poem, play, novel, or other work of literature about which you plan to write.

Annotate the text while you read:

- **Underline** passages which strike you, as they will form the backbone of your paper.
- **Jot** down any notes and questions.
- **Track** passages in which the author's usage of particular literary elements is repeated or noteworthy. Do you see an image over and over again, for example?
- **Make lists** of critical moments (with page numbers) that seem to *connect the dots* of a particular theme.

*Reading with a pen in your hand will make the process more active and keep you from drifting off and thinking about something else when you are trying to concentrate on reading.

Reread the work.

You may not have time to go through it again completely. However, you will need to **reread key passages**, and refresh your sense of the pivotal points in the text so that citations are easy to find when you need to make references to the text in the course of developing your ideas.

- As you reread the work, **identifying key passages** gives you a place to start *unpacking* the text line by line, asking questions about a writer's rhetorical choices, and getting to the 'bigger picture.' You don't necessarily need to know what your *thesis* is to get started; exploring the questions or passages you find most important, puzzling, or compelling, will lead you to your thesis.
- Remember that narrow, specific inquiries often make for more interesting, as well as approachable, topics than broad surveys. Additionally, as you do not have years of scholarly research to devote to your essay, steer away from biographical or historical surveys, or topics that seek to connect the work to the author's personal life in a facile way.

Be aware of any "extra" content within the work.

If your book has an introduction, read it. Introductions are often written by leading scholars or editors of the writer you are researching. An introduction will give you a background in the issues or topics associated with the work.

Critical editions or university press editions of works of literature often include critical essays in the back of the book, as well as **bibliographies of scholarly research** (only as current as the book's publication date, of course.) By scanning these bibliographies, you get a sense of the experts on your author. This can be helpful when you are faced with the task of sifting through search results and evaluating reputable sources, especially online.

Familiarize yourself with the guidelines for MLA citations.

- Find out the pieces of information (for example, names of publishers, page numbers, and dates) you will be required to include in your Works Cited page. This will save time, preventing you from having to backtrack through your research later on.

*Copies of the *MLA Handbook*, as well as other useful handouts on MLA documentation, are available at the Academic Success Center. Online, check out The Purdue Online Writing Lab, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

Head to the library.

College and public libraries employ full-time reference librarians. **Make an appointment with the Bucks County Community College librarian.** He or she can help you:

- learn how to find sources
- distinguish between primary and secondary sources, peer-reviewed journals, and less useful encyclopedic or general reference articles
- inter-library loan resources from libraries all over the country

A peer-reviewed journal is one that publishes articles juried by experts (typically the author's colleagues) in the particular field the journal's title suggests—for example, *Studies in the Novel* or *The Mark Twain Journal*.

Libraries purchase subscription service databases (JSTOR, EbscoHost) that enable you to search for articles from many journals online at the same time.

At home on your computer:

With your Bucks login & password, you can access library subscription services from home to continue on with literary research. These databases house many years and volumes of journals. You will be able to save/print some articles in full-text. Others you may need to order through the librarian or find in print and scan a copy for yourself. **JSTOR, LION, and EbscoHost** are good databases to start with during the research process.

A cautionary note: it should not be possible to do college-level research for a paper solely using Google. Doing a Google search, for example, on “Mark Twain and racism,” “Flaubert and adultery,” or “women in The Odyssey” will yield an overwhelming number of hits. These entries may range from more reputable forums on an author, typically sponsored by universities, to less reliable sources such as, personal web pages, Wikipedia-style surveys, and even illegal term papers. It's worth poking around for ideas, but if you are uncertain about any source, consult a librarian or ask your professor.

How to Access the JSTOR Database for Literary Research

From the Bucks County Community College homepage (www.bucks.edu):

1. Click “Library” located to the right of the Bucks County Community College logo.
2. Click on the “Databases” icon which is located on the right-hand side of the screen under “ask a librarian.”
3. Scroll down and click on the link to JSTOR.



*There is also a “tutorial” link located along the left hand side of the page that leads video tutorials for utilizing various databases.

* On an off-campus computer you will need to log on using your student ID and password to access JSTOR. Alternatively, from a campus computer, you may navigate directly to <http://www.jstor.org/search/>

The benefit of using JSTOR is that it will ensure your resources are peer-reviewed journals! JSTOR has done the job already of editing your search for reputable, scholarly sources—this is what is missing if you conduct a Google search.

Depending on your topic, you may have to broaden or narrow your initial search terms, try different search terms, or even revise your topic, based on the research available:

- Consider brainstorming a list of phrases and terms associated with your topic before you sit down.
- Be flexible and play around with search terms until you get your search results down to a manageable number of sources to sift through. For example, if you begin your search with the terms “mark twain” and “racism” you will turn up 314 hits. On the other hand, if you play around and refine with your search terms a bit: “huckleberry finn” and “racism” and “jim” and “dialect” narrows your results to 37 potentially relevant sources.
- Go to <http://about.jstor.org/jstor-help-support/how-to-use-jstor> for an online tutorial which shows you how to use the basic search.

How to use search commands effectively:

- Use “and” and “not” to limit your search
- Use “or” to broaden your search
- Use quotation marks to isolate a specific phrase you are searching for, for example: “The Yellow Wallpaper” in one field, rather than ‘yellow’ and ‘wallpaper’ in separate fields

Refer to the “Tips” page on JSTOR for help using the database and more advanced search commands. For example, using an asterisk to search for ‘feminis*’ will search for feminist and feminism; using ‘wom?n’ will include woman, women, and womyn in the results.

Once your search results are presented, you will need to evaluate their relevance to your research interests:

- Browse the titles and click on those that appear relevant.
- Determine whether an article will help you by scanning the first few pages or reading the abstract. An abstract is a short paragraph that summarizes an article.

Click on the title of the article to read through it.

Links at the top corners of the scanned page enable you to move forward and space back through the article. From the search results page, you may also click to download the article. Downloading the article is helpful because you can easily print the article out in its entirety while having a copy saved in case you need to come back to it.

*If available, download the PDF file. Doing so can make citations a bit easier because the page numbers are readily available.

Save the citations for relevant articles.

As you go through your search results, on the right of the article is a button entitled “save citation,” just click to save. When you are through sifting the results, click on ‘view saved citations’ for a customized bibliography of the articles you have selected. You can then read, print or save each accordingly. **

* Note: If you read an article from the screen without printing or saving, and you think you will be referring to it in your paper, be sure to write down the necessary information you will need (author, title, journal, date ...) in order to include it later in your MLA “Works Cited” page.

****A cautionary note:** Auto-formatted bibliographies can often be incorrect. Be sure to consult a tutor or a citation manual.

Helpful Websites for Your Literary Research:

- Voice of the Shuttle at UC Santa Barbara, <http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=3> lists links to scholarly websites by literary period and discipline
- Academy of American Poets, <http://www.poets.org/> , search by poem, poet, or school of thought, with links to reputable articles and brief biographies
- Modern American Poetry, <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/> search by poet for biography, poems, and critical essays
- Electronic Poetry Center at SUNY Buffalo, <http://epc.buffalo.edu/>, search by poet for poems, interviews, critical essays, poet's blogs, and links to online sources
- Studies in the Novel, <https://studiesinthenovel.org/>, search this journal's website by author's name for articles, read abstracts, and access articles at a subscribing library or through JSTOR
- Literary Resources on the Net, by Jack Lynch of Rutgers University, <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Lit/>, search by subject for links to reputable author homepages

For Help with MLA Style and Citations:

- The Owl at Purdue's "MLA Formatting and Style Guide": <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>
- The "MLA Style FAQ" (frequently asked questions) at the Modern Language Association homepage: http://www.mla.org/style_faq
- The BCCC Academic Success Center webpage's MLA Handout: <http://www.bucks.edu/academics/tutoring/handouts/writing/researchanddocumentation/>