

LITERARY RESEARCH FOR CRITICAL ESSAYS

***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 notes and questions.
 - Make lists of critical moments (with page numbers) that seem to ‘connect the dots’ of a particular theme.
 - Keep track of passages in which the author’s usage of particular literary elements is repeated or noteworthy.

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 ‘cover-to-cover.’ However, you will need to **reread key passages** and refresh your sense of ‘what happens where’ 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.
- **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, it is recommended to 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.
- It is a good idea to **familiarize yourself with the guidelines for MLA citations** *before* you start collecting your research materials. Knowing ahead of time the pieces of information (for example, names of publishers, page numbers, dates) you will be required to include in your Works Cited page will save you time, preventing you from having to backtrack through your research later on. Copies of the *MLA Handbook*, as well as useful handouts on MLA documentation, are available at the Tutoring Center. Online, check out The Purdue Online Writing Lab: <http://owl.purdue.edu>.

Getting started:

- **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 ‘big names’ 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.

Head to the library:

- College and public libraries employ full-time reference librarians. **Make an appointment with the 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 that enable you to search for articles from many journals online at the same time. See the accompanying “How to Use JSTOR” handout to get started finding *peer-reviewed* journal articles on your topic.

On the Internet:

- 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. If you are uncertain about any source, consult a librarian.
- **With your Bucks login, you can access library subscription services from home.** These databases house many years and volumes of journals. You will be able to print some articles in full-text. Others you may need to photocopy or order from the library. From Bucks County Community College Library Online Resources, <http://www.bucks.edu/library/eresources/index.html>, start with JSTOR, Literature Online Reference Edition (LION) and EBSCOhost.

*See the companion handout “How to Use JSTOR to Start Your Literary Research.”

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*, <http://epc.buffalo.edu/>, 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
- Netlibrary, <http://www.netlibrary.com/Search/BasicSearch.aspx>, from a campus computer or at home through your login on the BCCC Library Webpage, search for books which may be downloaded to your computer or searched and paged through online

For Help with MLA Style and Citations:

- The Owl at Purdue's "MLA Formatting and Style Guide":
<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/557/01/>
- The "MLA Style FAQ" (frequently asked questions) at the Modern Language Association homepage: http://www.mla.org/style_faq
- The BCCC Tutoring Center webpage's MLA Handout:
<http://www.bucks.edu/tutor/mla.html>