

A Five-Step Research Process for Your Literary Term Paper

Although it might be tempting to plan on only one trip to the library to gather information for your term paper, "one-stop shopping" is not really the best way to find the best sources for your paper. We strongly advise that you follow this process for gathering your sources. Remember, at any stage of the process that gives you difficulty; feel free to ask a librarian for assistance.

1. ***Read the text that your paper is about before coming over to the library.*** This might seem like a given (we hope so!), but some students come to the library without reading the text that will form the basis for their paper's subject, apparently on the theory that they will do all their reading when they get home. Unfortunately for them, some of these authors and texts have been written on a great deal, and selecting the best articles for the paper without a narrower topic is simply impossible. Don't assume that the librarian who is helping you has read the text recently or read it at all; even if s/he has, it is not his/her job to select your paper topic for you.
2. ***Read some general works about the text and/or about the author.*** Even though these sources cannot be counted as sources for your final paper, you will learn a great deal from them. You will also get some good ideas for focusing your paper. After you have attained some background knowledge on your subject, you will be able to search the catalog and databases much more intelligently. You will also be able to pick a paper topic that interests you, and that will improve your motivation throughout the research paper process.
3. ***Choose a topic.*** Based on the information you have gathered choose a topic.
4. ***Locate sources about your specific topic.*** Now it's time to search the Library Catalog and the electronic databases to find sources about your topic. Check print reference books and electronic databases for other sources about your topic. Once you've narrowed down your topic, you'll find yourself getting choosier about your sources. Print reference books can help you find sources that fit your topic exactly. If you still can't find exactly what you want, ask a librarian for help.
5. ***Make sure that you get all the necessary publication information.*** In order to cite your sources properly, you will need the publication information specified in the style guide that your instructor has told you to use. Write down all this information now; it will save you a great deal of time and stress when you type up the final copy of your paper.