



Learning Centre

## The History Research Essay: Getting Started

The beginning stage of doing a research paper can be tough. How can you find a topic? How can you find your information? How can you keep track of the information you find? This handout is a guide to approaching a history research paper. It suggests strategies for picking and narrowing your topic, finding *primary* and *secondary sources*<sup>1</sup>, and organizing your research so it is easy to work with.

### Understand the Assignment Instructions

Be sure to read your assignment instructions carefully before beginning the project. This way you can avoid wasting a lot of time doing the wrong thing. If you are confused, ask your instructor for clarification.

#### Step 1: Picking your topic

If you already have a good idea of what topic you would like to write about, go to Step 2. Otherwise...

It is always best to pick a topic that you are interested in. Start by looking at your textbook for ideas. Here are some ways to look:

- Flip through the text and mark anything that looks interesting to you; then go back and read about what you have marked. Pick the topic that you find the most interesting.
- If you have some idea of what you want to write about, use the index to look up a general topic such as “women.”

In some cases, you can even ask people such as grandparents or parents what they remember as being an interesting part of history that they have lived through. Not only could you come up with a topic this way, but you might also use that person as a source.

---

<sup>1</sup> Words in *italics* are defined at the end of this handout.

**Step 2: Narrowing your topic and developing a topic question**

Before going to the library to start researching, it is often a good idea to start thinking about a question to guide your research. Otherwise, you may end up with a lot of useless sources.

After reading everything your textbook has to offer on your topic, decide what aspects of the topic interest you the most and ask yourself questions you would like to answer in your essay. Basically, your essay needs to focus on answering one question. It must be a question which could be answered in different ways.

In history, you are generally required to write an argument essay. This means the essay needs a thesis statement which states a point of view. It must be possible to argue other points of view on the same topic. You decide what side of the argument you take; you should not lose marks for taking a different point of view from your instructor because “a thesis is not a fact, which can immediately be verified by data, but an assertion worth discussing – an argument with more than one possible conclusion.”<sup>2</sup>

For this handout, I am going to choose the topic “women”. In my text, I found the material on women in the workforce in World War I quite interesting, so I decided to focus my question on that:

Interest:

Unmarried women entering the workforce at the time of WWI

Question:

Did the war effort (by women) have a major impact on the women's liberation movement in Canada?

Now I have a question to focus my research. Because my question can either be agreed with or disagreed with, it provides a good focus for an argument paper.

The answer to your question will be the basis of your thesis statement. In order to keep an open mind about the topic, you may choose not to answer your own question until you have done more research, but that is entirely up to you.

---

<sup>2</sup> Mark Hellstern, Gregory M. Scott, and Stephen M. Garrison, The History Student Writer's Manual (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998), 20.

**Step 3: Using your textbook to find other sources**

Finding sources can be both tricky and time consuming. For history papers, you generally are looking for both *primary* and *secondary sources*. *Primary sources* can be especially hard to find with some topics. Your textbook can provide you with a real shortcut to finding good sources.

Follow these steps:

1. Look up your general topic in the index of your textbook.
2. Go to the relevant *footnotes* or *endnotes* section of the text and read it to find any related sources that the author(s) of your textbook used. Write down the complete information for any sources that are relevant to your topic.
3. Find as many of those sources as you can easily get hold of. Check out the footnotes or endnotes for the relevant sections of those sources as well.
4. Use the college library to get the sources you have found out about. Here is a good reason for you to start your essay **early** in the term; you will probably have found sources you can only get through Interlibrary Loan, and that process can take a couple of weeks. If you start the essay the week before the due date, you won't have time to get the appropriate sources. Interlibrary loan is easy to do on the Douglas College Library website <http://library.douglas.bc.ca/online.html>.

The great part about finding sources this way is that these sources have a proven track record. The textbook authors and the sources they relied on have found these sources to be useful on this topic.

An alternative approach is to start with a subject search on the net and/or in the library catalogue, but that approach will often require you to wade through a lot of useless sources to come up with a few good ones.

For my example paper on women, I began by going to “women” in the index of my textbook.<sup>3</sup>

Women

as professionals, 273, 375, 378  
 as teachers, 161  
 as university professors, 273, 378  
 campaign for prohibition, 187, 190-191  
campaign for women’s liberation, 401  
 child care, 332, 400  
 during Great Depression, 289, 300-301  
during World War I, 234, 240-241

---

in labour force, 140-41, 160-63, 270, 273-74, 300, 332, 375, 378, 400-401, 545-47

I have underlined items in the index above that could be related to what I want to research. However, when I read the sections, I found that some were not, in fact, relevant. “Women’s liberation” (p. 401) was too late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to have any relevance to my topic. When I looked at women “in [the] labour force,” I found that my time period (1913-1920) was not mentioned. The section “during World War I” on pages 234 and 240-241 is the most relevant to my thesis question.

This is what the endnotes for “during World War I” look like in my textbook, Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation<sup>4</sup>:

... Women’s contributions to the war effort are discussed in the relevant sections of Alison Prentice et al., *Canadian Women: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Brace, 1996); D. Smyth, “Women at war: The Origins of the Army Nursing Service,” *Horizon Canada* 8 (1985): 188-92; and Ceta Ramkhalawonsingh, “Women During the Great War,” in J. Action et al., eds., *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930* (Toronto: Canadian Women’s Educational Press, 1974), pp. 261-308.

Here I found one book and two journal articles that may be relevant to the example topic.

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from: R. Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, and Donald B. Smith, Destinies: Canadian History Since Confederation, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Toronto: Harcourt Canada, 2000), 596-597.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 254.

I found the book, Canadian Women<sup>5</sup>, in the college library and looked at its endnotes. This is what I found. The numbers to the left indicate footnote numbers made by the author:

14. Susan D. Becker, *The Origins of the Equal Rights Amendment: American Feminism between the wars* (Westport 1981), 198.
19. Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed*, 59. See also Scharf, “The Forgotten Woman’: Working Women, the New Deal, and Women’s Organizations,” in Scharf and Jenson, eds., *Decades of Discontent*. Scharf, in her insistence on the unity of feminism, seriously underplays the significance of the splits that divided interwar feminists on the question of the employment of wives.
29. Mederic Martin, “Go Home, Young Woman!” *Chatelaine* (September 1933), 10 and 37.  
49. “Persecution of Married Women,” Editorial, *Canadian Forum*, XII, 137 (February 1932), 164; Letter to the Editor from “A Married Business Woman,” *Toronto Mail and Empire*, 25 September 1930, 8; Harriet Parsons, “Canada Needs her Woman Power,” *Canadian Home Journal* (July 1933), Harriet Parson’s Papers, Metropolitan Toronto Public Library, Baldwin Room.
50. Letter from Alice Brown in “Can You Shackle Woman Again?” Reader’s Responses to Mederic Martin, *Chatelaine*, November 1933, 26.
56. Letter to the Editor from “Experienced,” *Toronto Mail and Empire*, 6 October 1930, 10; Letter to the Editor from “A Woman,” *Toronto Star*, 22 July 1931, 6.

In Women at Work: 1850-1930<sup>6</sup>, I found the following footnotes:

24. Enid M. Price, *Changes in the Industrial Occupations of Women in the Environment of Montreal during the Period of the War, 1914-1918*. McGill University, Faculty of Arts, Department of Economics and Political Science. (Submitted as a Master of Arts Thesis.)
42. ... see: J.S. Lemons, *Social Feminism in the 1920’s*. (U. of Illinois Press, 1973) and Helena Swanick, *The War and its Effect Upon Women and War*. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1971). The second was published in pamphlet form in 1915.
45. *Report of the Ontario Commission on Unemployment*, p. 63.
47. Marjory MacMurchy, *The Canadian Girl at Work*, (Toronto: 1919) From the Introduction.

Of all the sources found, there are 8 books (2 of which are American, but there might be some good information in them), 2 journal articles (1 of which may be a primary source), 3 magazine and 2 newspaper articles (all of which are primary sources), 1 Masters Thesis, and 1 government report. This is a total of 17 sources!

I ordered these sources through Interlibrary Loan.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Prentice et al., Canadian Women: A Reader (Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Company), 230-

<sup>6</sup> Janice Action et al., Women at Work: 1850-1930 (Toronto: Canadian Women’s Educational Press, 1974), 305-306.

**Step 4: Compile, sort, and organize**

At this stage, you need to start to pull information out of your sources, sort it and organize it. First, skim likely looking sections of the source material for information relevant to your topic. If a source looks useful, you need to record the bibliographical information from that source and begin to take notes. The most efficient way to do this is on a computer. For more information about how to use word processing to help you organize information for a research paper, see Learning Centre handout WR5.11 Research Papers: How Word Processing Can Help.

Whether you use a computer or not, this is the information you need to record.

1. A research log with the following information about each source:
  - ❖ Source # (assign a number or letter to each source to help keep track of it)
  - ❖ Title of the book, newspaper, magazine, or journal
  - ❖ Article title
  - ❖ Volume number, edition number, etc.
  - ❖ Author(s) & Editor(s)
  - ❖ Publisher
  - ❖ City
  - ❖ Date
  - ❖ Page numbers
  - ❖ Library Call # (for future reference, if necessary)
  
2. The facts and ideas you find in the sources. Be sure to include the source and the page number in any notes. Also, if you copy words from the source, be sure to use quotation marks so that later you are aware they are not your own words. If you are not careful about recording this information, you can waste a lot of time trying to find the information again when you need to cite your sources. You can also accidentally plagiarize.

You might find photocopying a useful approach to collecting information. You don't have to worry about overdue books, and you can write and highlight whatever you want on the photocopied pages. Also photocopying the front page with all the publishing information helps you to keep track of the source of your photocopies – you won't need to look it up later if you forget to write it down.

Once you have made notes on your sources, you need to think about what main points you will use to argue your point of view. Then group your notes according to those points and begin to create an outline and/or write the first draft of your paper.

## Conclusion

This handout has suggested strategies for getting started on your History paper – strategies for picking and narrowing your topic as well as finding useful sources and beginning to organize your information for your paper. However, you may feel you need to learn more things in order to complete your paper.

If you need help with other aspects of developing your History paper, you may want to consult the following other Learning Centre handouts and/or a Learning Centre tutor:

WR2.14	The Research Paper
WR2.16	Research Papers: How Word Processing Can Help
WR2.42	Finding a Strong Thesis
WR4.20	Thesis: Four Requirements
WR4.30	The Essay
WR7.40	University of Chicago Style Sheet
WR7.41	Documenting Sources Using Chicago Style
WR2.10	The Writing Process – A Checklist
WR7.60	Making Footnotes or Endnotes: WORD 2007

## Glossary

**Endnotes** – see *footnotes*.

**Footnotes** – footnotes are citations written at the bottom of the page for the purposes of showing the sources of your information and avoiding plagiarism. Endnotes serve the same purpose, except they are listed at the end of the paper. Footnotes or endnotes are usually done in Chicago Style. Footnotes do not replace the bibliography at the end of the paper. (See Learning Centre handouts WR7.40 and WR7.41 for proper documentation)

**Primary source** – “A first-hand account or documentary evidence produced by the participants in an historical period or event.”<sup>7</sup> For example, if one were researching the Great Depression, then newspaper articles, personal letters, interviews and government documents written by the people who were *actually* there and witnessed the event (first-hand experience) would be primary sources.

**Secondary source** – “Historical work produced by someone who was not present [to witness the period or event] and who must, therefore, rely on the works of those who were.”<sup>8</sup> For example, if one were researching the Great Depression, any kind of document written *after* the event and written by someone with no direct connection to the events would be a secondary source.

---

<sup>7</sup> Hellstern, 203.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.