

Research: Where do I begin?

Before you begin your research, you should ask yourself some questions. These will help narrow your search parameters.

What kind of information are you looking for?

Do you want facts? Opinions? News reports? Research studies? Analyses? Personal reflections? History?

Where would be a likely place to look?

Which sources are likely to be most useful to you? Libraries? The Internet? Academic periodicals? Newspapers? Government records?

If, for example, you searching for information on some current event, a reliable newspaper like the NY Times will be a useful source. Are you searching for statistics on some aspect of the U.S. population? Then, start with documents such as United States census reports. Do you want some scholarly interpretations of literature? If so, academic periodicals and books are likely to have what you're looking for. Want to know about commercial products? Will those companies have Web sites with information? Are you searching for local history? Then a county library, government office, or local newspaper archive is likely to be the most useful.

How much information do you need?

How many sources of information are you looking for? Do you need to view all sides of the issue?

Searching the World Wide Web: Overview

Searching the World Wide Web can be both beneficial and frustrating. You may find vast amounts of information, or you may not find the kinds of information you're looking for. Searching online will provide you with a wealth of information, but not all of it will be useful or of the highest quality.

The World Wide Web is a superb resource, but it doesn't contain all the information that you can find at a library or through library online resources. Don't expect to limit your search to what is on the Internet, and don't expect search engines to find everything that is on the Web.

Studies of search engine usage show that search engines are increasing exponentially in their indexing of new websites and information. Indexing is the web term for finding and including new web pages and other media in search results. For example, in 1994, Google indexed approximately 20 million pages. As of 2004, that number is up to 8 billion! However, search engines still only index a fraction of what is available on the Internet and not all of it is up to date. Search engines may only "crawl" sites (or revisit them for purposes of indexing) every month or so; information that has been updated since that time will be invisible to the search engines. After you try several search engines, you will see that you get different results from different sites. Also, remember that some information appears and then disappears from Web sites. Finally, search engines don't always search the entire page; if a page is larger than 100 to 500 k, many search engines will only index the first 100 to 500k of the page. So

there could be valuable information that is being overlooked by a search engine even in pages that are indexed.

Not all of the information located on the Internet is able to be found via search engines. Researchers Chris Sherman and Gary Price call this information the "invisible web" (another name that is frequently used is the "deep web"). Invisible web information includes certain file formats, information contained in databases, and other omitted pages from search engines.

So, using search engines is not the only way to find material on the web, but they are one tool you can use. Knowing a few search strategies and hints, as you use these engines, can make the search more profitable. This guide provides information on the different ways of locating material on the web including using search engines, searching the invisible web, and using web directories.

Avoiding Academic and Intellectual Plagiarism

Overview and Contradictions

Research-based writing in American institutions, both educational and corporate, is filled with rules that writers, particularly beginners, aren't aware of or don't know how to follow. Many of these rules have to do with research and proper citation. Gaining a familiarity of these rules, however, is critically important, as inadvertent mistakes can lead to charges of **plagiarism**, which is the uncredited use (both intentional and unintentional) of somebody else's words or ideas.

While some cultures may not insist so heavily on documenting sources of words, ideas, images, sounds, etc., American culture does. A charge of plagiarism can have severe consequences, including expulsion from a university or loss of a job, not to mention a writer's loss of credibility and professional standing.

Intellectual Challenges in American Academic Writing

There are some intellectual challenges that all students are faced with when writing. Sometimes these challenges can almost seem like contradictions, particularly when addressing them within a single paper. For example, American teachers often instruct students to:

- Develop a topic based on what has already been said and written **but** write something new and original
- Rely on opinions of experts and authorities on a topic **but** improve upon and/or disagree with those same opinions
- Give credit to researchers who have come before you **but** make your own significant contribution
- Improve your English or fit into a discourse community by building upon what you hear and read **but** use your own words and your own voice

Is It Plagiarism Yet?

There are some actions that can almost unquestionably be labeled plagiarism. Some of these include **buying, stealing, or borrowing a paper** (including, of course, copying an entire paper or article from the Web); **hiring someone to write your paper** for you; and **copying large sections of text** from a source without quotation marks or proper citation.

But then there are actions that are usually in more of a gray area. Some of these include using the words of a source too closely when paraphrasing (where quotation marks should have been used) or building on someone's ideas without citing their spoken or written work. Sometimes teachers suspecting students of plagiarism will consider the students' intent, and whether it appeared the student was deliberately trying to make ideas of others appear to be his or her own.

However, other teachers and administrators may not distinguish between deliberate and accidental plagiarism. So let's look at some strategies for avoiding even suspicion of plagiarism in the first place

When Do We Give Credit?

The key to avoiding plagiarism is to make sure you give credit where it is due. This may be credit for something somebody said, wrote, emailed, drew, or implied. Many professional organizations, including the Modern Language Association and the American Psychological Association, have lengthy guidelines for citing sources. However, students are often so busy trying to learn the rules of MLA format and style or APA format and style that they sometimes forget exactly what needs to be credited. Here, then, is **a brief list of what needs to be credited or documented:**

- Words or ideas presented in a magazine, book, newspaper, song, TV program, movie, Web page, computer program, letter, advertisement, or any other medium
- Information you gain through interviewing or conversing with another person, face to face, over the phone, or in writing
- When you copy the exact words or a unique phrase
- When you reprint any diagrams, illustrations, charts, pictures, or other visual materials
- When you reuse or repost any electronically-available media, including images, audio, video, or other media

Bottom line, document any words, ideas, or other productions that originate somewhere outside of you.

There are, of course, certain things that do not need documentation or credit, including:

- Writing your own lived experiences, your own observations and insights, your own thoughts, and your own conclusions about a subject
- When you are writing up your own results obtained through lab or field experiments
- When you use your own artwork, digital photographs, video, audio, etc.
- When you are using "common knowledge," things like folklore, common sense observations, myths, urban legends, and historical events (but **not** historical documents)
- When you are using generally-accepted facts, e.g., pollution is bad for the environment, including facts that are accepted within particular discourse communities, e.g., in the field of composition studies, "writing is a process" is a generally-accepted fact.

Deciding if Something is "Common Knowledge"

Generally speaking, you can regard something as common knowledge if you find the same information undocumented in at least five credible sources. Additionally, it might be common knowledge if you think the information you're presenting is something your readers will already know, or something that a person could easily find in general reference sources. But when in doubt, cite; if the citation turns out to be unnecessary, your teacher or editor will tell you.

Safe Practices

Most students, of course, don't intend to plagiarize. In fact, most realize that citing sources actually builds their credibility for an audience and even helps writers to better grasp information relevant to a topic or course of study. Mistakes in citation and crediting can still happen, so here are certain practices that can help you not only avoid plagiarism, but even improve the efficiency and organization of your research and writing.