

Seek and Ye Shall Find: Researching that @\$%*# Essay!

By Carter Hammett

Now that the lazy dog days of summer are rapidly receding into memory, it's time to think about going back to school. The campfire embers turn to ashes, the cottage has been packed up and soon, shorts and tees will be put away for another year. It's a shock to the system for many, and simply an annoying adjustment for others.

We need to reprogram ourselves for another nine months of hard work and tight deadlines on school assignments that seem impossible to meet.

Certainly the rise of the Internet has helped us meet those deadlines, but many instructors discourage its use, preferring instead the tried and true library research methods. The Internet has become today's library, in fact, a library at the fingertips. But where to start? And just how do you use a library anyway? Oddly, many clients I work with consider libraries to be archaic, yet many others have no idea how to begin conducting basic research on the Net, preferring instead those ubiquitous chat lines or the immediate delights of e-mail. And yet, and yet, once you know how...

Before we venture any further, realize that while the Internet is a valuable research tool, much that gets posted is not to be trusted. The Net is a forum for many people to place their own thoughts, stories and opinions online, but this does not constitute research or solid fact.

The Net is also a plethora of repetition which makes wading through the amount of information coma-inducing at best. However, this can also be valuable for cross-referencing and verification purposes.

Lastly, beware of dated materials! The Net is a great repository for information that happened 15 minutes ago. Yet another in this writer's long list of pet peeves are the individuals that litter the information highway with garbage that's dated and irrelevant! One active employment agency reviewed recently, hadn't updated its workshop schedule for two years!

Information is produced at an alarmingly rapid pace, and it is wise to always double check your sources and verify the data you are gathering through cross referencing! Old journalist's maxim: "When in doubt, check it out."

Another way to deal effectively with the Net is by maximizing efficiency. So many users are stuck in the rut of single search engines such as Lycos or Magellan. Toss them away! Go with meta search engines, which, literally, are search engines that search search engines. These are tools that gather other search engines together under one umbrella and enable the user to perform a search from one web page. Good examples of these include: Dogpile, Ixquick, C4, 37.com, Mamma, Ask Jeeves, and of course, Google.

When using these sites, it's a good idea to type quotation marks around the information you are looking for, the more specific the better. Don't, for example, enter "jobs" if in fact you are looking for "customer service jobs in Toronto." The more specific the better. Quotation marks around the subject sought will allow the search engine to retrieve the data as a string and therefore narrow the search to something more specific.

There are also a number of subject-based search engines that will retrieve information linked to a specific subject. [Www.jobsearchengine.com](http://www.jobsearchengine.com) is a good example of this, but there are hundreds of others covering everything from philosophy to professional wrestling. Try going to http://www.lub.lu.se/netlab/documents/nav_menu.html for an excellent overview of search engines.

Another useful and time saving research tool is the metabrowser. Metabrowsers allow the user to observe multiple web pages from a single site. Quickbrowse is a fee-based service that enables users to view up to 20 pages from its site. Go to www.quickbrowse.com and check it out. Although fee-based, the service does offer a free trial usage after a registration procedure. There are many more available online for sampling.

Web Rings are online communities gathered together under a common theme. They share information and resources and are often linked together to form a neighbourhood of information. These are sort

of reverse search engines, in that they are gathered together for you already. Simply go to www.webring.com type what subject you wish to research. Again, the more specific the better.

Those of us, who grew up using libraries, are often dazzled by the amount of services available there today. Everything is electronic and often self-serve, which can be very frustrating and actually overwhelming.

Most libraries still use The Dewey Decimal Classification system, which is a general knowledge organization tool that is continuously revised to keep pace with knowledge. The system was conceived by Melville Dewey in 1873 and first published in 1876. The Dewey Decimal Classification is the most widely used library classification system in the world. It is used in more than 135 countries and has been translated into over 30 languages. In North America, 95% of all public and school libraries, 25% of all college and university libraries, and 20% of special libraries use the DDC. In addition, Dewey is used for other purposes, e.g., as a browsing mechanism for resources on the World Wide Web.

And this is where all of your library searching can begin. One of the nicest things about the system is ease of use and logical flow from one classification to the next. Once you get to know the system, the rest flows quite easily. Begin with the library's public access catalogue. Here, you will find lists of reference materials, including almanacs, encyclopedias, AV catalogues, government publications, magazines, vertical files, CD ROMs and directories.

As you gather your data, note full bibliographical information, including author, title, place and date of publication. Two excellent directories from which to obtain general information are the Canadian Almanac and Associations Canada. Both of these are published by Micromedia publications and are a staple in all local libraries.

The next step in researching a paper is to state your thesis. The thesis is like a mission statement that will be balanced and supported by arguments to defend this belief. After this, develop a tentative outline. All points must relate to the same major topic that you first mentioned in your thesis.

The purpose of your outline is to think through your topic and carefully organize it logically before writing. This is perhaps the most important part of a research paper and should include an introduction, body and conclusion.

Now comes the time to organize your notes. Critically analyze your research using the best available sources, check for accuracy and verify the information is factual, up to date and correct. Like a journalism story, opposing views should also be noted if they help to support your thesis. This is the part where you will analyze, synthesize, sort and digest the information you have gathered and learn something about your topic.

Researching a paper doesn't have to be onerously difficult. Organization and critical thinking go a long way and can even be pleasurable. On top of that, it will establish the foundation for life long learning that is expected of graduates and necessary for the up to date workers in today's knowledge-based economy. Ultimately, research is an investment in the self and survival skill that will touch every facet of your life from now on. "If you build it, they will come."

Good luck and happy searching.

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