

Tips for Literary Term Paper Research

Research, regardless of the subject, is not a single step, not a quick leap over the threshold and you're done. It is more like a journey: a series of steps or tasks which results in a completed speech, report, or term paper. It is best to think of this series of steps as a process. This approach emphasizes the common aspects of research as it is used for different subjects, and over time makes them familiar; it also breaks down the research assignment into more easily-managed components and thereby makes the entire assignment less intimidating. The following series of steps can be used for literary research assignments.

1. Know your text. Read the literary work you have been assigned so you will have familiarity with it beyond what *Cliff's Notes* or *Masterplots* will provide. Without reading your text you will not know what events take place in it, much less their significance. Most of the information sources you will use for your paper will be written by professional scholars and critics for other scholars and critics, *not for students*. These writers will assume their audience has a familiarity with the text and will not discuss all parts of it. Without knowing the text yourself, you will have difficulty following the discussions of these scholars and critics.

2. Get background information about your literary work and its author. Look at encyclopedias, dictionaries, and biographical works devoted specifically to literature. Unlike books and articles written by professional scholars and critics for their peers, the essays in these specialized reference works *are* written with students in mind. These essays discuss the major points of a literary work, or of a writer's life or career, and might provide topic ideas for your term paper. Often it is easier to ask a librarian about these specialized reference works, which may be print or online, than try to find them on your own.

3. Choose your topic. Knowing your topic keeps your research focused and on target. Once you have settled on a topic it becomes easier to evaluate information sources about your literary text and identify the ones which will help you in writing your paper. Think of your topic as the bullseye in an archery target and the scholarly and critical materials you will examine as arrows. Obviously you want only the arrows that will land in or closest to the bullseye, but until you've chosen a topic you won't know which these are.

The remainder of the research process (source selection, note-taking, drafting and revising) hinges on how well you perform this step. It helps insure efficiency and effectiveness in your research: that you will discover relevant material in your search for sources, and you will be able to use nearly all the information you find in your term paper. No wasted notes, which also represent wasted time and effort.

4. Use the library's finding aids to locate information sources about your topic. The library's online catalog, electronic databases, and print bibliographies and indexes are called "reference tools." In research, reference tools lead to information sources: from the tools, you compile a list of items from which you expect to get information you can use in your term paper. Your information usually will come from books (either books by a single author or essays in anthologies) or from articles in print or electronic journals. The library's online catalog will help you locate books, and the subscription databases will help you locate articles in scholarly journals. Note that neither of these approaches involves searching the Internet, which does not lend itself well to academic research.

Keep in mind that journal articles will contain more recent, and often more tightly focused, information than what will be found in books. Also know that with a subject like literature, electronic reference tools may have to be supplemented with older print indexes and bibliographies. The backfiles of electronic databases as a rule are not deep enough to cover all the scholarship written about a literary work. If you have already chosen a topic and established the focus of your paper, it should be easy to find useable information sources that match well with your focus.

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 by the style guide that your instructor has told you to use. Write down all this information as you use the source; it will save you a great deal of time and stress when you type up the final copy of your paper. It also will save you a second trip to the library just to obtain this information. Copy the publication data at the same time you get the information.