GETTING STARTED ON HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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Does writing your history paper have you feeling stressed out? Are you staring at a stack of books thinking, I wish there were an easier way…?

If so, you’re in luck. I used to feel just like you—frustrated, confused, overwhelmed—and I’m a history major! As a plebe, I took HI301 (“History of the Military Art”), and I was terrified of the final paper. I read every book on my subject, threw everything I learned onto the page, and *drumroll please* got an F for my troubles. I was devastated, but, lucky for me, that’s not where my story ends.

The next semester, in HI302, I got an A+ on my paper, and it took less work. How did I do it? Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce a new way of approaching the three main kinds of historical sources—primary, secondary, tertiary—and conducting your research: Airplane, Taxi, Tennis Shoes!

Airplane
Tertiary Sources
What happened?
Get the big picture.

Taxi
Secondary Sources
How do experts see it?
Get more informed.

Tennis Shoes
Primary Sources
What do you make of it?
Make the trip (or, topic) your own.

First things first…why transportation?

Analogies are useful. They help us think differently about things—discover new perspectives and approaches that we might not otherwise see. For me, it helps to think about historical research in terms of transportation. Both have many forms and functions; all of them are valuable sometimes but none of them are valuable all of the time. After all, you wouldn’t board an airplane to cross a street or hail a cab to cross an ocean. In the same vein, when it comes to historical research you shouldn’t spend time on a source that can’t tell you what you want to know at a given point in your journey.

Getting started…what you need to pack.

There’s no need to have a thesis at the start of your journey, but you do need to formulate a key question to answer. That way you’ll know what you’re looking for.

Once you have your prompt or a specific historical question in mind, you’re ready to start exploring...
Different country? Catch a flight!
Are you relatively new to your topic? Consult tertiary sources like encyclopedias and textbooks for a general overview. Like airplanes, tertiary sources cover a lot of ground quickly. They should be relatively free of biases. Their main purpose is to get you oriented to your subject.

In the city? Hail a cab!
Secondary sources—sources created after the fact—offer an expert’s interpretation of primary sources. Talk about time-savers! These sources can also highlight debates between historians. When you review secondary sources, look for gaps in the conversation or claims you find questionable or especially intriguing. These are all things to keep in mind when you study the primary sources for yourself.

In the streets? Walk around!
This is where you should spend most of your time. Most of your evidence should come from primary sources, historical documents created at the time by people close to the event. After all, if you were traveling in a foreign city for the first time, wouldn’t you want to look around for yourself? Sure, you might value the opinions of others, but eventually you’d want to make your own judgments. That’s the only way to reach new, original conclusions.

But why should a novice like me consult primary sources when an expert already has? Claims supported by primary sources are stronger than claims supported by only tertiary or secondary ones. Think of it this way: if someone wanted to know more about you should they consult a one-page write-up from an instructor or everything you have in your room? Sure, the one-page write-up is faster and perhaps more organized, but your possessions and writings capture who you are much better, right?

What's the difference between primary and secondary sources? Primary sources include almost anything created at the time under study by someone with firsthand-experience. Examples: archives, manuscripts; artifacts (tools, coins, clothing, furniture, etc.); autobiographies, memoirs; books, magazines, newspapers, advertisements; diaries and letters; government documents; original documents (birth certificates, property deeds, trial transcripts); recordings; photographs, drawings, posters; public opinion polls and research data (including census data); scientific journal articles that report experimental research from the time; speeches and oral histories.

Where to Go From Here...

Ask the right questions!
Before you consult a source, ask: why this source? As you consult a source, ask: what did it tell me? After you consult a source, ask: what questions do I still have? Always research with your argument in mind.

Develop a provisional thesis!
Once you know enough about your topic to have an opinion, write a tentative thesis to guide your work and then keep digging! How does a source prove, disprove, or complicate the point you’re trying to make?

Plan your argument!
Now that you know what you’re going to say, it’s time to decide how you want to say it. How will you present your points? Will you address a counter-argument? By asking such questions early on, you'll have a head start on organization and a better idea of which sources to inspect—how to gather the right evidence for your claims. For instance, if you plan on discussing population changes, then be on the lookout for census data. Likewise, if you want to know how a person felt, then try to get your hands on their letters or diaries. Bottom line: if you know what you’re looking for, you’ll know where to look.

Pitfalls to Avoid

◊ Don't cherry-pick evidence. This can be accidental or intentional, so watch out. Read the entire source to avoid mischaracterization.
◊ Don’t use unreliable sources. Only include relevant, scholarly sources. No Wikipedia.
◊ Don't ignore a professor's instructions. Adhere to the word count and minimum source requirement.
◊ Don't wait too long to start. Even easy things are hard when they’re left until the last minute.
◊ Don't wait too long to cite. Failure to cite undermines your academic integrity and risks more than just a bad grade. Cite as you go to avoid accidental plagiarism and poor citations.