

Drafting a research question and beginning to search for sources

Learning Goals

This worksheet will help you begin the research process for your annotated bibliography and final paper. Developing a research question will provide search terms and focus your thinking when you evaluate your search results. It also will help later on because the answer to your question may become the thesis of your paper.

SECTION 1: Survey the literature

1. **Describe your topic for the final paper.** Use your topic proposal and write out any key terms, concepts and ideas that describe your topic. Include any titles or authors you plan to reference.

For example: *Madness in Caribbean literature*

<i>Describe topic here.</i>	
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2. **Do a quick search to gather ideas on what other people have said about your topic.** Circle/highlight a few terms in the description of your topic above. Then, select one of the scholarly databases described on the Articles page of the English Research guide ([go/enamguide/](https://go.middlebury.edu/enamguide/)) or one of the [History Guides](#). In the database, enter the key terms you've recorded above. If you don't find anything, then remove a few words from your search to broaden the topic. Once you start finding articles, take notes on how the other researchers have approached your topic.

For example: *madness; treatment of madness*
 French language literature
 Caribbean women; Caribbean identity; Caribbean history

<i>How have other researchers approached this topic? Pick 3-4 articles and record a few key terms from each article.</i>	1. 2. 3. 4.
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SECTION 2: Draft a question and begin a search

1. **Define your topic.** Use the info you've gathered above to help you specify and clarify your topic.
2. **Talk with a partner about the significance of your topic.** Refer to your notes on page one, share the list of approaches to your topic, and discuss the approach that is most significant. That is, which topic is the most current, debatable, or relevant to a notable concern? Which do you want to learn about? Circle that topic (or a combination of subtopics!). This will be your first potential research topic.

For example: *madness, treatment of madness*
 French language literature
 Caribbean women, Caribbean identity, Caribbean history

3. **Turn this potential topic into a question.** It might help to ask yourself why you picked this topic. What are you curious about? What do you want to learn? Also remember that the question needs to be open-ended (it shouldn't be answerable with "yes" or "no"), and therefore it will often begin with "Why" or "How."

A **research question** states the specific issue or problem that your assignment will focus on. It also outlines the task that you will need to complete.

For example: *How does the treatment of madness in French Caribbean literature reflect Caribbean identity?*

<i>Record a research question. It should be open-ended and focused, and any answer to it should be arguable.</i>	
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4. **Circle potential search terms in the question above.** Your question will give you a few words to search for. Write them below, then add similar terms, synonyms and alternate spellings. Keep your search terms organized: put all related terms in one row and connect the terms with **or**.

Example: How does the **treatment of madness** in **French Caribbean literature** reflect **Caribbean identity**?

	madness	or	mental illness	or	insanity
and	French Caribbean	or	Martinique	or	
and	literature	or	theater	or	
and	identity	or	"cultural identity"	or	

Synonyms for "madness" are in the same row, connected by "or." Repeat on each line with different concepts

		or		or	
and		or		or	
and		or		or	
and		or		or	

4. **Search for scholarly materials.** Select one of the scholarly databases described on the Articles page of the English Research guide ([go/enamguide/](https://go.middlebury.edu/enamguide/)) or one of the [History Guides](#). In the database, use the advanced search form to run some form of the search that you constructed in step 3.

Tip: Articles, dissertations and books that are written for scholars will help you develop a detailed and nuanced understanding of your topic. You've started with an open question, and now you're trying to find a variety of potential answers.

5. **As you review your results, write down more words.** When you're looking through your search results, you'll see words you hadn't thought of. Record them for your next search.

For example:

Caribbean > "French Caribbean"

public opinion, public sentiment > collective memory

<i>What words might you add to your search?</i>	
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6. **Stop and reflect.** If you have a few good sources, then it might be time to stop searching and read what you have. Alternatively, you might need more.

For example:

Found several articles about madness in anglophone literature. Learn more?

<i>Look at what you've collected so far. Do you need more? About what?</i>	
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7. **Plan your next steps.** Review this worksheet. What should you do next? Above all else, consider scheduling a consultation with your librarian. Talking through this process can be helpful!

For example:

Not finding much. Make appointment with Leanne, find alternative search terms. Find articles on madness in literature AND Caribbean identity, then make connections

<i>What will you do next?</i>	
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