5.5: Library Research: It's a Process

Not all of your college grades are based on exams given in class. Papers, oral presentations, and in-depth research projects throughout your academic career will require consultation with resources beyond a textbook or Google. Many students approach research haphazardly not realizing that they can use a step-by-step process to remove the mystery surrounding research and relieve anxiety.

About the Information Search Process

Carol Kuhlthau (n.d.), a professor at Rutgers University, developed a six-stage model called the Information Search Process (ISP) that describes students’ thoughts, actions, and feelings as they move through the beginning stages of a research project to the final product. Though using a formal process may sound troublesome, in fact you already use the ISP in your everyday decisions. For example, the last time you went to the movies with a group of friends you gathered information on which movies were at which theaters, what the start times were, who could go, and how you would get there. Once you had all the specifics, you evaluated the information, made choices, and then acted on them. This is the Information Search Process, and you use it without even realizing it.

Breaking down the research process into similar steps and following the ISP model will make your task easier to conquer and help ensure that you have met assignment requirements and have turned in a well-thought-out, thorough research paper.
The ISP Model and You

It is easy to get lost in a research assignment’s meaning, lose focus on your topic, get overwhelmed with information, and not seek help. In the movie example above, the ISP does not take long to start and finish. This is not the case with research papers.

This section will describe the challenges you can expect at each stage of the ISP model and give you strategies for managing them.

**ISP Stage 1: Initiation** – Before beginning any research, make certain you understand the requirements of the assignment.

**Challenges:**

1. Understanding instructor expectations
   - **Strategies:** Many instructors will use terms such as scholarly, popular, peer-reviewed, refereed, primary, secondary, authoritative, etc., to describe the types of sources they expect you to use in assignments. To learn what these mean, see UT Arlington Library’s How to Find and Evaluate Sources ([http://library.uta.edu/howTo/evaluateSources.pdf](http://library.uta.edu/howTo/evaluateSources.pdf)).
   - Listen carefully and take notes when the instructor assigns the paper or project and do not be afraid to ask questions. For tips, see University of North Carolina’s Understanding Assignments ([writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/understanding-assignments](http://library.uta.edu/howTo/evaluateSources.pdf)).

2. Worrying about your ability to complete the assignment on time
   - **Strategies:** Use goal-setting processes learned in this class to create a timeline for completion of the assignment. For an online tool, see University of Minnesota’s Assignment Calculator ([www.lib.umn.edu/apps/ac](http://library.uta.edu/howTo/evaluateSources.pdf)).

**ISP Stage 2: Selection** – Once you understand the assignment, select a general topic that meets its requirements.

**Challenge:** Finding interesting topic ideas

- **Strategies:** Begin by brainstorming ideas that are relevant to the assignment, but also reflect your personal interests. You may also look to academic encyclopedias, magazines, and journals within the subject area, current events publications, and class discussions for potential ideas.

- For help selecting a general topic, see Duke University Libraries’ Choosing a Topic ([http://library.duke.edu/services/ins_guide/choosing.html](http://library.duke.edu/services/ins_guide/choosing.html)) or California State University Long Beach Library’s Paper Topics ([csulb.libguides.com/papertopics](http://library.duke.edu/services/ins_guide/choosing.html)).

**ISP Stage 3: Exploration** – Once you have decided on a general topic, gather background information to understand it better.

**Challenges:**

1. Looking for general information about a topic
   - **Strategies:** When beginning research on an unfamiliar topic, consult sources that provide background information like academic encyclopedias, textbooks, and general Web sites. Although you may not use these sources in the final paper or project, they often provide the information necessary to progress to the next stage of your assignment.
Library databases that contain general information (NetID and password required) can be found at www.libguides.uta.edu/az.php and include databases such as:

- CQ Researcher
- Gale Virtual Reference Library
- UT Arlington’s Library Catalog
- Points of View Reference Center

2. Locating appropriate source types

   Strategies: The topic and type of information needed determines the type of source (book, magazine article, newspaper article, Web site, journal article, etc.) that is best. To learn more about the information cycle as it relates to type of information needed, see UT Arlington Library’s How to Find and Evaluate Sources (http://library.uta.edu/howTo/evaluateSources.pdf).

ISP Stage 4: Formulation – Using what you have learned from your preliminary research, develop a thesis that is specific, significant, and arguable.

Challenge: Writing a thesis that is specific, significant, and arguable

   Strategies: After gathering background information about a topic, apply what you have learned to the development of a thesis. The thesis will act as the framework for your paper. For information about developing a thesis, see Dartmouth Writing Program’s Developing Your Thesis (https://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/learning/materials/materials-first-year-writers/developing-your-thesis).

ISP Stage 5: Collection – Once you have developed a thesis, gather sources that specifically relate to it.

Challenges:

1. Developing a search strategy

   Strategies: Have a plan of action before you begin your thesis-specific research. You may use some of the same sources found when gathering your background information.

   1. Brainstorm relevant keywords and combine these terms to retrieve relevant and specific information.
   2. Specify the type of sources (scholarly, peer-reviewed, primary, etc.) you require. For help, see Tisch Library’s Database Search Strategy Worksheet (researchguides.library.tufts.edu/content.php?id=68058&isd=502985).
   3. Select database(s) or search engine(s) you will use to find your sources. For subject-specific guides to research, see UT Arlington Library’s Subject and Course Guides (http://libguides.uta.edu).
   4. Use research notes to track where you have searched for information and what you have selected for potential use in your assignment. For tips about keeping track of your research, see Princeton University’s Working Habits that Work (www.princeton.edu/pr/pub/integrity/pages/habits/).

1. Evaluating sources

   Strategies: Evaluate each source to determine if it meets the requirements of the assignment and select sources that are written by experts and published (either in print or online) by reputable organizations or individuals. For information about evaluating sources, see UT Arlington Library’s How to Find and Evaluate Sources (http://library.uta.edu/howTo/evaluateSources.pdf).

ISP Stage 6: Presentation – Use the information you gathered to complete your assignment.
Challenges:

1. Incorporating sources into your assignment
   ◦ Strategies: Once you have found your sources, incorporate them into your assignment in a way that both supports your thesis and observes the rules of academic integrity. For information about incorporating sources, see Western Oregon University’s Incorporating Sources into Your Research Paper (http://www.wou.edu/provost/library/clip/tutori- als/incorp_sources.htm).

2. Citing your sources
   ◦ Strategies: To make citing sources easier, you may use online citation generators like Son of Citation Machine (Warlick &The Landmark Project 2000–2010) (http://citationmachine.net/) or use citation genera- tors built into some of the library’s databases. Always check your citations against appropriate style manuals, copies of which can be found in the Library’s reference area. For helpful tips about many citation styles, see UT Arlington Library’s Citation How-Tos (library.uta.edu/how-to).


The Importance of Citing Sources

When you use outside sources like books or articles in your assignment, you make your arguments more credible. You demonstrate that your arguments are not just your opinion—they are based on evidence. But when you use other people’s ideas in your work, you must observe the rules of academic integrity and say where they came from. You must be able to prove which ideas are yours and which ones you borrow.

Citations prevent any confusion over what is original to you and what you are borrowing while citation styles like MLA or APA supply a standard method for identifying other people’s ideas. If you use someone else’s idea without citing it properly, you have committed the serious offense of plagiarism.

For more information about plagiarism, see the section on “Academic Integrity” in Chapter 6.

Timeline

As discussed in Chapter 4 of this book, goal setting is an essential element to complete any project. S.M.A.R.T. goals clearly define your tasks and keep you motivated. Consider Figure 5-2. With the deadline of your research paper as your ultimate goal and considering the stages of the ISP model defined previously, create smaller, short-term goals to ensure your success. Note that each ISP stage should be a stop or short-term goal in your research timeline. Be sure to consider the suggested length of time at each stage when setting your goals.
Figure 5-2. Timeline for the ISP Model

Tips for Success in Conducting Library Research

- Recognize that frustration and uncertainty are part of the process.
• Reevaluate your progress and repeat steps if necessary, but do not completely eliminate any.
• Steps take time. Plan accordingly.
• Take advantage of outside resources to help get you through the uncertainty.

**Activity 5-6**

Pick an upcoming research assignment from any class. Using the Information Search Process model, create a series of short-term S.M.A.R.T. goals that will help you complete the assignment.

**Activity 5-7**

Go to UT Arlington Library’s How to Find and Evaluate Sources ([http://library.uta.edu/howTo/evaluateSources.pdf](http://library.uta.edu/howTo/evaluateSources.pdf)). What are the criteria for determining if a source is credible?

**Thought Questions**

• Consult “Chapter 10: Campus Resources” and review all of the resources and services offered by UT Arlington Libraries. What are the three library resources that you feel will help you the most? Evaluate the benefit of each resource and discuss with a classmate.

• What challenges do you face when citing sources? Think of at least three strategies that would help you overcome these challenges.

• Why is it important to cite the sources you use in your assignments?

• Examine the relationship between the information Search Process and Bloom’s taxonomy. How does the required task at each stage of the ISP correlate with the types of thinking required in Bloom’s Taxonomy?

• How can the active reading strategies you have learned be applied to evaluating sources for your assignments?

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**Five-day Study plan Worksheet**

**Date of Test:** ______________________

**Course:** __________________________

**Test Format:**

◦ Objective
◦ Essay
◦ Mixed

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