

Fifth & sixth lectures

Course book: *Research Writing Simplified* by Raymond H. Clines & Elizabeth R. Cobb

First chapter: The Research Process

Preparing a Bibliography and a Preliminary Thesis

From the very beginning of the research process, it is essential that you keep a record of books, articles, and other resources pertaining to your topic. Computer databases are becoming increasingly sophisticated in identifying and printing a list of possible resources for any topic. Often, you can assess the value of an article for your purposes by reading an abstract which many databases such as *ProQuest* or *EBSCOhost* provide. General reference works such as online or print encyclopedias often list important sources at the end of each entry, and nearly every book and article you find will mention additional works. Just glancing through the bibliographies of books and articles can give you valuable information.

The best way to make use of the various and valuable resources available in a library is to follow a step-by-step research procedure:

- 1- Use print and electronic reference works to define and narrow your topic. Use electronic databases and the Internet to locate the sources that will help you to gain some general background on your topic. Note keywords, phrases, and important dates.
- 2- Consult computer databases, print indexes, and computer catalogs to find relevant book titles and articles, and locations of general works on your topic.

- 3- Locate your sources on the computer sites, or the library shelves. During this stage, you will need to find books, articles, essays, reviews and documents.

You will read and take notes from these resources and formulate your attitude based on what you learn from them. You may want to make printouts or photocopies of the bibliographies you find for later reference. Be sure to include the following information with the notes that you take from each source:

- Books:
Name of author, last name first
Title of book (underlined)
Place of publication
Publisher's name
Date of publication
- Articles:
Name of author
Title of article (in quotation marks)
Title of journal, magazine, or newspaper
Volume number and date of publication
Page numbers on which the article appears
- Electronic Sources:
All of the above information when given
Publication medium
Publication date of the database in addition to date of document
Date of access and URL if the source is online
Page or paragraph numbers if available
Any referencing information that would help you to locate it again

Begin reading some of the articles and browsing through books to get a feel for the different angles to your subject. Pay close attention to table of contents headings, read first and last sections, and skim indexes.

Once you have briefed yourself on the various issues and approaches to your subject, you are ready to develop a *preliminary thesis*, a statement that expresses your particular attitude towards your subject. As you continue your research you may need to change your thesis, but it is important to write one with care at this stage to help you focus your work. Five steps are involved in formulating a thesis:

- 1- State the objective of your paper in a single statement, not a question.
- 2- Confirm that you have taken a position on your subject and have not just summarized it or stated a fact about it. **A thesis consists of a topic and your idea about it.**
- 3- Ground your thesis statement in solid evidence. Do not stick to a position if you find that current research does not support you.
- 4- State the objective of your paper in precise language. Avoid overly general, vague, or abstract wording.
- 5- Keep your topic limited to an objective that is appropriate to the length and scope of the assignment.

Formulating a preliminary thesis and compiling a preliminary bibliography will allow you to proceed to the next step in the process: taking notes.

Working with Sources and Preparing to Write

All source material needs to be evaluated before it can be used in research. Often evaluation will take place immediately, as you glance at irrelevant titles or old publication dates. Sometimes you will need to

skim through a source, paying particular attention to the table of contents, chapter headings, introductions and summaries. All source materials, print and electronic, should be assessed on the basis of four criteria: relevance, currency, credibility, and objectivity.

- 1- **Relevance:** your preliminary thesis will serve as a guide to determining the relevance of source. By giving your research a clear focus from the beginning, you can save yourself time and effort.
- 2- **Currency:** some expectations might include topics dealing with historical or literary focuses. Recent newspaper and magazine articles usually offer more up-to-date information than books.
- 3- **Credibility:** during the source evaluation phase, the author's credibility must be considered. Is the author respected by experts in the field? Has this author written other publications on this topic or related topics? The publication itself can be a key to assessing the credibility of a source.
- 4- **Objectivity:** many respected publications are aimed at specific audiences and have editorial policies that may affect the objectivity of articles published in them. Major newspapers are known for being conservative or liberal, pro-Democratic or Pro-Republican. Thus, editorials from these newspapers may be convincing, but they may not present the whole picture; you can usually detect a bias. Only by looking at your topic from the perspectives presented in a number of different sources can you be sure of getting the complete story.

Taking Notes

Evaluating sources plays an important part in determining the articles from which you will want to take careful notes and on which you will want to spend less time. Each one has a slightly different method of

taking notes and recording source information. Whatever system you use, make sure that you record the information and its source accurately. One practical system involves taking notes on note cards and writing down bibliographic information on separate note cards. It is not necessary to record all of the publication information on your *note cards* because that information is what you include on your *bibliography cards*. Just be sure to devise some way to identify the source of your notes (the author's last name will usually be enough), and *always include specific page numbers* because that information will not be on your bibliography card.

Here are a few additional tips on note-taking:

- Record one idea per card, and write on only one side. That way the cards can be rearranged easily, and important information will not be overlooked.
- Title each card with a brief description – a phrase – of what the note is about, but use full, well-developed sentences in the note itself. This will make it easier to arrange your notes and write your first draft later.
- Before beginning a new note-taking session, read over your last set of note cards to recall where you were in your thinking.

In addition, you will need to decide whether to summarize, paraphrase, or quote the source directly. Most of your notes should be in the form of summaries or paraphrases, which means that they should be written in your own words. You can condense whole books or articles into summaries if you are interested only in the main ideas. Paraphrasing involves rewording source material without condensing it. While you are putting the information into your own words, it is important not to

misrepresent the author or change the tone to suit the needs of your paper.

Writing a research paper means presenting your ideas and the ideas of others in your own personal way, so be very selective about any information that you decide to quote directly. A few select direct quotations can add emphasis, emotion, or authority to your paper, but too many will weaken a paper by causing you to lose credibility as the author of what you have written. Remember to put quotation marks around all exact wording, and as with summaries and paraphrases, be sure to note the author and page number.

As you take notes, you will become adapt at distinguishing between fact and opinion. A *fact* can be proved; an *opinion* offers information that cannot be documented. You may wish to use both opinions and facts to support your thesis, but distinguish between these two types of information for your reader. Be aware that reviews and editorials contain more opinion than fact.

Avoid jumping to incorrect conclusions. A helpful hint for avoiding premature judgments is to check dates of publication and make certain that you have enough current information to draw conclusions. Try summarizing what you have read in one sentence before writing anything down, and document everything that you use from outside sources. Consider the following tips:

- Always put quotation marks around directly quoted material.
- Always put source information on each note card, including specific page numbers.
- When summarizing and paraphrasing, put the original passages out of sight before writing your own version.

These tips help you avoid the illegal practice of *plagiarism* – using another author’s ideas as if they were your own. Lack of careful attention to documentation may cause you to commit plagiarism unintentionally. That is, you may forget to attribute information to a source, or you may forget to include a page number.

Working thesis and Outline

Writing a thesis and an outline can make the writing process much easier. They will guide your note-taking by arranging the main points of your topic. This requires more thought and planning to successfully organize an academic paper. Ideally, your thesis, outline, and note-taking should all change and evolve together as you complete your research. Remain open to new ideas all through the note-taking process, modifying the direction of your research, the thesis, and the outline to accommodate new information.

Preparing a Detailed Outline

Before you begin writing the first draft, it is advisable to prepare a detailed outline. Indicate specifically how each idea will be developed, including the placement of quotations and references you plan to cite. You can use a full-sentence outline or a phrase outline, but in either case, identify the level of supporting information.

Dear students, please read the above passages with great attention.

Thank you.