

Chapter 5

Search Engines, Research Ingenuity

- Net gains – and losses
- Stacks of possibilities
- Going by the book
- Notable discoveries

All right then: You accept that history is a worthwhile undertaking, understand the difference between a primary and a secondary source, and are willing to think, at least initially, in terms of questions rather than answers. Now what? What's the right way to do research?

If only there was an easy way to reply. Certainly there are things you can do – I'm going to get to those almost immediately – but the first thing I want to make clear is that research is an art, not a science, and at its best is a habit you develop rather than a fixed set of tricks. Anybody can do research. And just about everybody does – typing an address into a search engine or checking to see how a movie has been reviewed is nothing if not research. But there can be so much more to

Essaying the Past: How to Read, Write, and Think About History,
Second Edition. Jim Cullen.

© 2013 Jim Cullen. Published 2013 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

it than that. Researching skills are a form of power that can improve your work and the quality of your life.

Net Gains – and Losses

Let's begin with a somewhat touchy subject: the Internet (for more on this, see Appendix E). Most books of the kind you're reading, including this one at an earlier point in the discussion, will warn you away from basing your work on sources you find online. That's good advice, not only because the quality of what you'll find there will not always be good – a website with a name like *Hakim and Angela's FABULOUS guide to the Prezidents* should not inspire confidence – but also because there's all kinds of material you'll never be able to read, much less know about, simply from a Google search. Using the Internet for academic work is a little like eating fast food: It's undeniably convenient and cheap, but it's not good for you (something you can sometimes tell pretty quickly). You've got to be willing to do a little exercise, mental and even physical.

That said, it's hopeless to expect you won't start with the materials closest at hand, and that almost inevitably will be the Internet connection on your computer. The first stop for many students is an encyclopedia, particularly Wikipedia, a multilingual, Web-based, free content encyclopedia that its website claims is ranked among the ten most visited sites in the world.¹ Wikipedia is a collective enterprise, to which anyone can contribute. It has been the source of some controversy.² But as a tertiary source (which, as you may remember from Chapter 3, is a general overview of a subject, usually compiled from secondary sources), it's often as good as anything you will find on the Internet. I myself often use Wikipedia. But – and this is important – *I never rely on it as the final source of a fact or a quote for anything*

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia> (accessed July 4, 2007).

² Controversies like the vandalism of some entries and manufactured credentials by at least one writer led Middlebury College to ban students from citing Wikipedia in their essays, though many teachers there and elsewhere recognize both the

I plan to use in print. For background information? Sure. As a source of ideas about how to organize material? Absolutely. (Wikipedia does a particularly nice job of providing outlines with major articles.) But for a fact or interpretation that will end up in something I write? Not unless I can confirm it with something more solid. The same is true of any other website that does not originate with a source I consider reliable, like a research university or a major national newspaper.

In the earliest stages of my research I'm also apt to use an online retailer like Amazon.com. That's not because I necessarily plan to buy lots of books. Nor is it because I expect to be able to read much of what I find, even though some titles have a "Search Inside" feature that will allow a user limited access to excerpts. And I by no means assume that a retailer will have many or even most of the sources on a topic in question. But that's precisely the point. A resource like Amazon will point out the most recent material I'm likely to be able to get my hands on. Much of what's been published in the last decade is likely to be in a library somewhere (more on that in a moment), and if it's brand new, I should be able to find reviews of it relatively easily – or, if it looks really good, to take the plunge and buy it.

There is one other form of shopping I can recommend doing from home, and that is a quick raid on the treasures of the United States government. The Library of Congress, founded in 1815 when Thomas Jefferson agreed to sell his collection of books to the United States after the government's library was destroyed in the War of 1812, is one

implausibility of an outright ban and the utility of Wikipedia when used properly. See Noam Cohen, "A Contributor to Wikipedia Has His Fictional Side," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2007, and Noam Cohen, "A History Department Bans Citing Wikipedia as a Research Source," *The New York Times*, February 21, 2007. Both accessed at nytimes.com (July 4, 2007). I read both these stories in the newspaper when they were originally published. One of the wonderful things about the Internet is that I could recover them quickly when I realized they could help me with this chapter. I have not provided the entire URLs, which would easily fill a line of text and be unwieldy even if you copied and pasted them in your browser, because I think you will be easily able to find them using the author and/or title of the piece in an online *Times* index at home or through your school. (See Appendix C for more on citation methodology.)

of the great libraries of the world. While you can't check anything out of it unless you happen to be in Washington, D.C., you can learn what's out there on just about any subject (though only someone really practiced in using the *Library of Congress Subject Headings*, available online and in bound form in most public libraries, will really be able to navigate the maze). Even better, the LOC (www.loc.gov) has particular collections, like its wonderful "American Memory" website, where you can find, and actually view, all kinds of primary source documents – letters, maps, photographs, sound recordings, and much more.³ Not all this material can be easily downloaded, but a lot of it can. And even more of it can be ordered as prints at relatively low cost. Since much of this material is in the public domain – it belongs to the people – you can pretty much do anything you want with it. I've gotten a lot of the illustrations for my books in this way.

Stacks of Possibilities

Preliminary moves with resources like Wikipedia and Amazon.com are particularly useful at that stage of your project when you don't even really know what you're looking for. They will almost inevitably present you with sources, ideas, or topics that simply had not occurred to you. And if you find yourself getting restless, even unhappy, that can actually be helpful. It should prompt you to ask: Why don't I like what I'm finding? What did I expect? If I'm not finding that thing, or that aspect of the thing, that I'm curious about, is it because there's a bona fide shortage of information? Or maybe I'm looking in the wrong place? Maybe I'm asking the wrong question?

This is one of those moments when it makes sense to finally venture outside for a trip to the library. There are all kinds of reasons to go

³ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html> (accessed July 6, 2007). It's important to note that the LOC also affords access to resources that are not solely focused on the United States. See, for example, the "Global Gateway" on its home page or go directly to the site (<http://international.loc.gov/intldl/intldlhome.html>). You may also want to consult other national resources such as the U.K.'s BUBL (<http://bubl.ac.uk/>).

there, some of which you can foresee, and some of which you can't unless you actually go. Sometimes the mere fact of taking a break by walking over there will allow you to clear your head in a way that can break a mental logjam.

Another great reason to go the library: librarians. Librarians are one of the great, and underutilized, resources of academic life. They're professionally trained to look for sources, and they're usually eager, even happy, to help. (Be nice to them! Not only is it good manners, but they're people you want to have on your side.) Librarians not only know their way around the place in a way you never will, but they're aware of the newest catalogs, databases, and sources. They may also be able to point you in the direction of material not immediately on hand, but which they can get for you, through interlibrary loan, for example. Though this may not afford you instant gratification – and you should be doing this work far enough in advance that you can afford a little time – interlibrary loans services are often admirably efficient. Don't be shy or skeptical about this. There's no guarantee of a quick payoff, but the chances are good that you will learn something from a librarian that you'd find out no other way.

One of the things a librarian is most likely to show you that you wouldn't otherwise know about are reference books, which are usually shelved separately from other books in the library. Here you will find not only periodically updated general works like the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (which has a much better intellectual reputation than Wikipedia), but also specialized works such as *The Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*,⁴ high-quality tertiary sources typically written by respected scholars that will provide you with an overview of a topic as well as bibliographies that can really get you started. The reference section will also house dictionaries, atlases, and collections of documents that can both help you focus a topic as well as identify important sources. Some of these

⁴ *The Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, 3 vols., edited by Mary Kupiec Cayton and Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001).

materials might be available online; some might not. Because they're in book form, they sometimes date more quickly than Internet sources (though Internet resources that are not updated can get pretty musty, too). Yet even a dated source can be useful, because older sources sometimes get lost in the publishing shuffle, and can be more useful than material that simply happens to be newer. Newer sources often refer to golden oldies, so having access to those oldies can be helpful.

Here's another kind of source, typically secondary, that libraries are good for: periodical literature, i.e. magazines, journals, reports, and other materials that are issued at regular intervals. (Libraries can also be good, even uniquely so, in offering access to primary sources like newspapers, particularly old or discontinued ones, though as often as not you can access them from the websites of the newspapers themselves.) For the purposes of academic work, there are two types of periodical literature. The first is the so-called popular press, which consists of magazines published for a general readership, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Rolling Stone*, though it also includes specialty magazines read by people to enjoy in their spare time, like *Popular Mechanics* or *Scientific American*. The second type is scholarly journals, such as *The Journal of American History*, *Foreign Affairs*, or *The American Historical Review* (the major generalist resource of record for all kinds of academic history published in the United States). There's some overlap in these categories – *Scientific American* is not exactly light reading, and *Foreign Affairs* is a journal you sometimes find in an airport shop. In general, scholarly articles are more authoritative but also more technical than those in the popular press, where articles are usually shorter and more vivid, a tradeoff for you to consider – one reason to look for both.

Before the diffusion of the Internet in the 1990s, all periodical literature was printed on paper, bound in large volumes every six months or so, and placed on shelves in row after row in the stacks, where much of it can still be found in any given library. To save space, some library systems transferred such material onto rolls of microfilm and sheets of microfiche, which can be read using specialized machines in libraries. A little later, some of it was transferred to newer technology like CD-ROM. Nowadays, a lot of it – *but not all of it* – can

be accessed online. Some of it – *but not all of it* – can be accessed at home. But again, it's hard to know without actually visiting the library.

So how do you find these treasures? The answer is catalogs. For generations of readers of the popular press, the go-to source was – and for material published before 1983 remains – the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* published by the H. W. Wilson Company (material published subsequently can be accessed online). These big green volumes, which hold a few months of listings for any given year, are organized alphabetically by subject. You sometimes need to think a little creatively about how to search for that subject – you may get better results researching an essay about the Great Depression by looking up terms like “Stock Market” and “Herbert Hoover” – but the *Reader's Guide* is a notably user-friendly index to what was published in the popular press for much of modern times. (What do I mean by “modern times”? I don't say. But the reference to the Great Depression, which began in 1929, gives you a clue.)

There are a number of print and electronic databases for scholarly periodical literature, some highly specialized. Some of these resources list articles. Some include abstracts, or summaries of articles, which can be helpful in telling you whether it's worthwhile to track down the entire piece. Sometimes, if you're lucky, you can get the entire text from an online database. The *Humanities Index* (called *Humanities Full Text* online) catalogs most major English-language historical journals, among others. I myself am partial to JSTOR (short for “Journal Storage”), an online index begun in 1995 that offers access to full-text versions of articles from thousands of journals whose topics you can narrow or tailor as you see fit. The directions for using such catalogs are usually pretty obvious when it comes to simple searches. But they often have sophisticated tools that allow you to narrow your search, if you know what you're looking for – and you know what you're doing. Neither, of course, can be taken for granted, which is one more reason why making friends with a librarian can help. Once you've got a title, the name of the journal, and the date (maybe the page number, but you can probably do without it by checking the table of contents when you find it), you can wade into the stacks – very often journals are arranged alphabetically by title – and retrieve the article.

Going by the Book

Reference works, documents, and articles are all common and useful sources for academic essays. But the cornerstone of scholarship, for now anyway, remains printed and bound books. Chances are that any good essay is going to rely on books, though those books may be of different kinds and found in different ways.

One of the most potent tools at your disposal is your school's Online Public Access Catalog, often called OPAC, which you can access from home or the library. In these and the above-mentioned databases you can find sources using an author, title, subject, or keyword – this last option is particularly helpful when you lack complete information or are trying to cast a wider net. The great asset of a keyword search is that you're likely to get lots of returns, which is great if you're still thinking broadly. The great liability of a keyword search is, well, you're likely to get lots of returns, which isn't great if you're trying to narrow your focus. Sometimes a catalog's search engine will make a distinction between the exact title of a book and words that appear in the title. The former will sharply narrow the search so that you only get what you're looking for. The latter will be helpful if you don't know or can't quite remember a title, or if there may be a handful of books with similar titles.

Spend even a few minutes with a library catalog, and you're likely to generate a number of books that might be useful for your purposes. Some will be primary sources. Some will be secondary. Some will be edited anthologies of either or both, consisting of chapters or excerpts from a series of writers on a particular topic. Navigate your way through the various screens to get the call number, either via the Dewey Decimal System or the more expansive Library of Congress method, and be sure to check for the availability (no sense in looking for a book that's been loaned out) and location (check, for example, that the book isn't a reference title, or kept in a special collection, which means it won't be shelved in the main stacks). Then, armed with the call numbers, and a map or directions from that friendly librarian, venture forth into the stacks.

As you grope your way through the shelves toward the book or books you're looking for, you'll begin to practice the final research technique, and one of the most important ones: shelf browsing. Very often it's books *near* the one you're looking for, which are classified by their topic, that are as likely to be helpful as what you think you want. Spend some time around such shelves. You'll learn a lot just by looking at spines.

It's hard to say how long you'll need to spend in the stacks. Maybe a few minutes, maybe a few hours. You may well find yourself flipping through a few books to decide if you want them. At some point, you'll decide you have enough and will check out, photocopy, or take notes on what you need. *Be sure to generate a preliminary bibliography on anything you imagine yourself using, whether or not you're actually going to quote it.* (See Appendix C, for information on vital data for bibliographies and footnotes.)

Notable Discoveries

It's at this point that you may also begin to take notes. Note-taking is a highly personal, even idiosyncratic, activity, and one that you'll probably develop on your own if in fact you haven't already. Just keep in mind two things. The first is recording your sources in such a way that you will be able to find them again if you need to, and putting them in an order – alphabetical, thematic, chronological, whatever – that makes sense to you. Some people make lists on their computers; others remain faithful to the old-fashioned technique of index cards, which are easy to carry and shuffle. Second, make sure anything you write down is done in a way that *you* might find useful, whether a summary of a document, copying down key passages, or even general impressions, including opinions. Don't worry about clarity or insight for anyone but yourself. Some experts on writing emphasize the importance of distilling material, of boiling it down to its essence, and if that makes sense to you, do so. But other people seem to relish, even need, to write down material as a way of absorbing it (this is why your own notes are often more useful than they might seem to be compared

with photocopied or downloaded material, which you simply don't engage with as deeply).

In any case, as I said, this is the point where you *begin* to take notes. The process will continue, and get refined, as you proceed and begin to get a better idea of what it is you really want to write about.

Indeed, at some point during or after the collecting stage, perhaps in between or after multiple trips to the library, you'll need to really settle down and not merely dip, but dive, into some of what you've collected. And along the way you'll need to step back and reflect on what you've read. But this is likely to be a different kind of reading than you customarily do, and it merits some attention. So we're going to give the matter its own chapter.