

STUDENT RESEARCH GUIDE

The “Our Plural History” website challenges students to investigate ethnicity, immigration, pluralism and multiculturalism from a variety of perspectives. The first section of this Student Research Guide acquaints students with the basic research tools, including primary and secondary sources, interviews, surveys, observation and analysis.

Primary and secondary sources

Primary sources are the original materials upon which research is based. Primary sources present information in its original form, without interpretation or evaluation by other writers. Some examples of primary sources include:

- diaries
- autobiographies
- interviews, surveys and fieldwork
- letters and correspondence
- speeches
- newspaper articles (*may also be secondary*)
- government documents
- sets of data, such as census statistics
- works of literature (such as poems and fiction)
- photographs and works of art
- original documents (such as birth certificate or trial transcripts)

Secondary sources describe, interpret, analyze and evaluate primary sources. Because secondary sources comment on and discuss the evidence provided by primary sources, they are works which are one or more steps removed from the event or information they refer to, being written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. They tend to be works which repackage, reorganize, reinterpret or summarize the new information reported in primary sources. Some examples of secondary sources include:

- biographical works
- commentaries
- dissertations or theses
- bibliographies
- journal articles
- newspaper and popular magazine articles (*may also be primary*)
- review articles and literature reviews
- textbooks
- works of criticism and interpretation

Types of primary research

There are several types of primary research methods, including interviews, surveys, observations and analysis.

Interviews are one-on-one or small group question-and-answer sessions. Interviews are useful for obtaining expert or knowledgeable opinion of a subject, or for getting a large amount of information from a small group of people.

Surveys involve larger groups of people and present questions in a more systematic and formal way. Surveys will provide a limited amount of information from a large group of people and are useful when you want to learn what a larger population thinks.

Observations involve taking organized notes about specific people, events, or locales. Observations are useful when you want insight into a subject without the biased viewpoint of an interview.

Analysis involves collecting data or information and organizing it in some fashion based upon criteria that you develop. Analysis is useful when you want to find some trend or pattern, or understand motivations and behaviors during some period in the past.

Getting started

Consider the following questions when beginning to think about conducting primary research:

- What do I want to discover?
- How do I plan on discovering it?
- Who am I going to talk to/observe/survey?
- How am I going to be able gain access to these groups or individuals?
- What are my biases about this topic?
- How can I make sure my biases are not reflected in my research methods?
- What do I expect to discover?

Interviewing

There are different types of interviews, and you should choose one based on the kind of technology you have available to you, the availability of the individual you wish to interview, and how comfortable you feel talking to people.

Face to face interviews involve sitting down and talking with someone. These types of interviews allow you to adapt your questioning to the answers of the person you are interviewing. *Phone interviews* can be used when you need to interview someone who is geographically far away, who is too busy to meet with you to talk, or who does not want to use Internet technology. *E-mail interviews* are less personal than face-to-face or phone interviews, but are usually more convenient. You may not get as much information from someone in an e-mail interview since you are not able to ask follow-up questions or play off the interviewee's responses.

Setting up an interview

When setting up an interview, be sure to be courteous and professional. Explain to the person being interviewed who you are, what you want to talk to them about, and what project you are working on. Don't be discouraged if not everyone you contact is willing to be interviewed.

Interview do's and dont's

When conducting interviews...

- Do start the interview with some small talk to give both yourself and the person you are interviewing a chance to get comfortable.
- Do bring redundant recording equipment in case something happens to one of your recording devices.
- Do pay attention to what is being said during the interview and follow up responses that sound interesting.
- Do come to the interview prepared. You should learn as much as you can about the person you are going to interview before the interview takes place so that you can tailor your questions to them.
- Don't pester or push the person you are interviewing. If he or she does not want to talk about an issue, you should respect that desire.
- Don't stick to your questions rigidly. If an interesting subject comes up that relates to your research, feel free to ask additional questions about it.
- Don't allow the person you are interviewing to continually get off topic. If the conversation drifts, ask follow-up questions to redirect the conversation to the subject at hand.

Surveying

Surveying is a great way to discover what a large amount of people think about a particular issue or how a group of people report their behavior. Surveys can be done on a large range of topics and can be conducted relatively easily.

Decide what group you are going to target based on the focus of your research and the people that you have access to. Choose an appropriate number of people to survey. You don't want too few surveys because you won't have enough answers to support any generalizations or findings you may make. At the same time, you do not want too many surveys because you will be overwhelmed with analyzing your data.

You can choose to conduct your survey in person (i.e. walk up to people and ask them questions); on paper (i.e. hand out surveys and ask people to return them); or even via the Internet. Choose the appropriate method based on the length of your survey and the types of questions asked. For your first survey, it is better to keep things simple. Short questions are usually more effective than longer ones.

What type of questions are you going to ask? Do you want open-ended questions or closed questions? Open-ended questions are questions that allow the participant any type of response. An example of an open-ended question is: How are you feeling today? A closed question is one with a set of possible responses or yes/no responses. An example is: Did you feel that the treatment of the new arrivals was fair? While closed

questions are much easier to analyze, they do not provide the rich responses you may get with open-ended questions. Ultimately, the type of question you ask depends on what you want to discover.

Analysis

Analysis is a type of primary research that involves finding and interpreting patterns in data, classifying those patterns, and generalizing the results. Analysis is useful when investigating actions, events, or occurrences in different texts, media, or publications. Analysis can also be done on new documents or performed on raw data that you yourself have collected. Analysis research involves (a) finding and collecting documents or data, (b) specifying the criteria or patterns that you are looking for, and (c) analyzing documents for patterns, noting number of occurrences or other instances of interesting phenomena. The key to analyzing your data is pulling out information that is the most pertinent to your writing, information you can highlight and discuss, and information that will support any claims that you are making.

To analyze interviews, go back through the answers you received and decide how to use them in your writing. You can group the answers into categories and create a chart of how those answers best fit within your paper or article. When analyzing surveys, you want to get the raw data into a form that you can manipulate. If you were using a numerical system or yes/no answer system for your survey, you may find it helpful to enter the results into a spreadsheet program such as Microsoft Excel. If you asked open-ended questions, try to fit the answers into categories of responses.

Observations are more difficult to analyze because you often write down everything you see when you are taking notes. The difficulty is in deciding what material is relevant. Start by organizing your notes into categories or by some criteria. Once you have everything organized, see if you can make some generalizations about what you have observed.

When possible, verify a piece of data, a finding, or a generalization with several different research methods. This adds to your credibility and makes your findings stronger. At the same time, remember that your findings may not be representative of the population as a whole. It is important not to over-generalize your findings: do not assume that your findings are necessarily true of every person within the group or every person in a society.