

THE UNIVERSAL RESEARCH AND INQUIRY METHOD

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Described

Many guides to introductory library research recommend approximately the same research procedure. I call it the Universal Research and Inquiry Method (URIM). URIM looks something like the following.

Part One: Define Research Question

1. Select/define an initial topic. This may be narrow or broad, esoteric or mundane, advanced or novice. It should fit your interests and abilities, and meet course requirements or address practical needs.
2. Read at least two reliable summary discussions of your topic. These may be brief treatments such as are typically found in encyclopedias or other reference works. But you may read journal articles or even skim entire books at this stage.
3. Organize your thinking and formulate a specific research-worthy question about the topic. Write a brief outline to guide your study.

Part Two: Build Bibliography

4. Build an adequate bibliography using databases and specialized tools. Take care to include recent works. Examine the main works you have found and check their bibliographies. Take special care to include much-cited works and diverse viewpoints. Perhaps use software such as EndNote or Zotero to manage and format your citations.
5. If you are a total novice in the field, evaluate credibility of sources and authors based on superficial markers such as reputation of publisher, whether the source is a peer-reviewed journal, author's education/credentials, etc. Consult book reviews. Later you will do a more careful assessments based on the actual evidence and arguments used in the sources.

Part Three: Read and Think

6. Read, always focusing on the specific research question, but taking time to further educate yourself about the topic in general. Take notes. Document carefully so you do not accidentally plagiarize when you write the first draft. Organize notes.
7. While reading, analyze (i.e., identify and isolate basic arguments and lines of evidence others have used.)

8. While reading, think critically. What is probably true, and why do you think so? This is the heart of the process. Evaluate the evidence and logic and overall argument used by each source. Consult cited primary sources yourself to verify evidence and examine context. Pay attention to both the big picture and the small details as needed.
9. You have reached the pivotal point in your study. Formulate *tentative* conclusion and thesis statement. Synthesize and organize a tentative argument to support it. This will be a very brief and very incomplete version of your core argument. It might be one to three pages long, for example. Focus on the overall logic. Just list lines of evidence; don't develop specific evidence (yet).
10. Test and refine your argument. Surface notable gaps and problems. Read and study to address major problems and gaps in your argument. Gradually expand the mini-paper as needed. But keep it small.

Part Four: Write and Think

11. Once you think you can prove your point, take time to decide how you want to present the material to a particular audience to support your thesis. This is your rhetorical strategy, and it may require creativity in how you frame or present your material. Write a new outline which takes into account the rhetorical strategy and the argument. Do not blindly follow the outline you used to guide your study and note-taking.
12. Compose draft. Present the truth as you understand it, being careful to evaluate all significant views fairly. Be logical. Document thoroughly and accurately as you write, not as an afterthought. Continue to think critically.
13. Evaluate your work. Does the draft as a whole hang together and present a coherent argument for the thesis? Does each section advance the goal? Is it persuasive? Remember you are not just summarizing what you read; you are advancing a persuasive case to support a specific conclusion. Rewrite as needed, even if you must reorganize or add new evidence and arguments.
14. Edit for cohesion and accuracy. Polish and format.

URIM calls for thoughtful reading, careful understanding of sources, and honest consideration of a wide range of views. Everything is geared to help the researcher interact with scholarly literature and critically evaluate each viewpoint. Often this means weighing conflicting contradictory evidence and, if possible, identifying a viewpoint that reasonably accounts for all evidence. Although URIM involves gathering and sifting information, the goal is not thoughtless collection of footnotes and quotations, or thoughtless regurgitation of what one has read. Information-gathering is a means, not the ends. Judicious, thoughtful, critical assessment of views and evidence is central. Communication is also important. URIM is designed to help

the researcher produce a cogent and well documented argument for a specific thesis, including fair assessment of evidence and arguments for and against the thesis.

Evaluated

URIM has some obvious virtues. It is conceptually and practically simple. It provides a starting point and a procedure to follow. It is applicable to a wide range of topics and disciplines. It stresses critical thinking. You have probably followed a procedure much like URIM many times during your academic career.

URIM was designed for undergraduate students. It has a place in graduate studies and it can even be used with profit by mature scholars for certain kinds of study, but URIM falls short as a guide for doctoral studies or advanced research. Why? What is missing or wrong? What is a better guide to advanced work? We will talk about that in class.