

Strategies for Conducting Literary Research

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Contents

Introduction to Strategies for Conducting Literary Research	1
Table of Contents	3
Chapter One: Understanding the Assignment / Types of Research Projects / Preliminary Research	
Chapter One Objectives	7
Understanding the Assignment	8
Types of Research Projects	12
Conducting Preliminary Research	20
Advanced Tip: Calls for Papers	23
Chapter Two: Identifying a Problem / Considering Audience	
Chapter Two Objectives	26
Identifying a Problem	27
Evaluating Relevance & Purpose	33
Considering Audience	39
Chapter Three: Searching as Strategic Exploration / Scholarship as Conversation	
Chapter Three Objectives	43
Searching as Strategic Exploration	45
Scholarship as Conversation	51

Chapter Four: Theory, Methodologies, Methods, and Evidence

Chapter Four Objectives	57
Theory Guides Inquiry	59
Research Methods	66
Evidence	72

Chapter Five: Reading and Interpreting Literary Works

Chapter Five Objectives	75
Reading Literary Works	76
Interpreting Literary Works	86

Chapter Six: Reviewing the Secondary Literature / Types of Literature Reviews / Reading Like a Researcher

Chapter Six Objectives	93
Reviewing the Secondary Literature	94
Types of Literature Reviews	98
Reading Like a Researcher	103
Advanced Tip: Talk to People!	113

Chapter 7: Library Services & Resources

Chapter Seven Objectives	115
Introducing Primo!	116
Library Services & Resources	118
Database Search Strategies	123
Citation Management	125
Advanced Tip: Creating Search Alerts	127

Chapter Eight: Using Google Scholar

Chapter Eight Objectives	129
Google Scholar features	130
Validating resources	134
Advanced Tip: Citation Chaining	138

Chapter Nine: Evaluating Scholarly Resources

Chapter Nine Objectives	141
Finding Trustworthy Resources	142
Avoiding Misinformation, Disinformation, and Dismediation	145

Chapter Ten: Refining and Evaluating Your Research Question

Chapter Ten Objectives	150
Refining Your Research Question	151
Evaluating Your Research Question	154
Advanced Tip: Writing an Abstract	158

Chapter Eleven: Research as an Inferential and Critical Process / Relating the Conceptual and the Concrete

Chapter Eleven Objectives	161
Research as an Inferential and Critical Process	162
Relating the Conceptual and the Concrete	167

Chapter Twelve: Positing a Thesis Statement and Composing a Title / Defining Key Terms

Chapter Twelve Objectives	171
Positing a Thesis Statement and Composing a Title	172

Defining Key Terms	175
Formatting and Style Guidelines: MLA and APA	177

Chapter Thirteen: The Writing Process

Chapter Thirteen Objectives	179
Writer's Block	181
Structures	185
Revisions	192
Writing Academic Prose	195

Chapter Fourteen: Avoiding Plagiarism / Additional Resources / Foundational Materials Assignment

Avoiding Plagiarism	202
Additional Resources	205
Foundational Materials Assignment	208
Glossary	212

Introduction to Strategies for Conducting Literary Research

Welcome to Strategies for Conducting Literary Research! This course walks you through the process of conducting inquiry-based research while helping to refine your library skills. Along the way, we will draw from the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) [Information Literacy Framework](#). According to the ACRL, “Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers lead to additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field.” We will discuss this concept more in-depth throughout the course. The course will focus on a research project created by Jada, an English major who conducted a literary analysis of [James Baldwin’s](#) classic short story, “[Sonny’s Blues](#).”¹

Meet Jada!



Jada graduated from UCF with a bachelor’s degree in English/Creative Writing. She is currently in the Elementary Education MA program at UCF. When she’s not

teaching she can be found reading, writing, drawing, or catching up on sleep. We will follow her through the research process to see how her project evolved as she conducted an in-depth literature review while mastering the use of library resources.

The Complexity of Literary Studies Research

In a research-based course, your instructor might require you to write a research paper of 5-6 or 10-12 pages, but the knowledge you need to perform this task can fill up dozens of pages. Writing about literature is a complicated, often messy process; it needs to meet high standards while incorporating knowledge from other fields such as psychology, history, science, and other arts. It entails knowledge about language, genre, structures, styles, and more. To produce good research about literature, we need to know a lot of things about a lot of things!

Although we discuss the research process in a linear fashion throughout these chapters, you'll find that, in practice, literary research is a highly recursive process. We're constantly circling back through the process as we write. Because writing instructors (even those who made this course) are locked into presenting the writing process in a linear way, we tend to discuss it in terms of stages such as preliminary research, drafting, revising, and so on. But writing a research paper requires us to rethink and redo our work at any stage. It's not uncommon for writers to be in the middle of proofreading (one of the final stages) and realize they need to go back and gather more research. Though this course focuses on research about literature, the skills and knowledge in these modules apply to many other areas and topics, especially in the humanities.

The table of contents is on the following page.

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Understanding the Assignment / Types of Research Projects / Preliminary Research

- Chapter One Objectives
- Understanding the Assignment
- Types of Research Projects
- Conducting Preliminary Research
- Advanced Tip: Calls for Papers

Chapter Two: Identifying a Problem / Considering Audience

- Chapter Two Objectives
- Identifying a Problem
- Evaluating Relevance & Purpose
- Considering Audience

Chapter Three: Searching as Strategic Exploration / Scholarship as Conversation

- Chapter Three Objectives
- Searching as Strategic Exploration
- Scholarship as Conversation

Chapter Four: Theory, Methodologies, Methods, and Evidence

- Chapter Four Objectives
- Theory Guides Inquiry
- Research Methods
- Evidence

Chapter Five: Reading and Interpreting Literary Works

- Chapter Five Objectives
- Reading Literary Works
- Interpreting Literary Works

Chapter Six: Reviewing the Secondary Literature / Types of Literature Reviews / Reading Like a Researcher

- Chapter Six Objectives
- Reviewing the Secondary Literature
- Types of Literature Reviews
- Reading Like a Researcher
- Advanced Tip: Talk to People!

Chapter Seven: Library Services & Resources

- Chapter Seven Objectives
- Introducing Primo!
- Library Services & Resources
- Database Search Strategies
- Citation Management
- Advanced Tip: Creating Search Alerts

Chapter Eight: Using Google Scholar

- Chapter Eight Objectives
- Google Scholar features
- Validating resources
- Advanced Tip: Citation Chaining

Chapter Nine: Evaluating Scholarly Resources

- Chapter Nine Objectives
- Finding trustworthy resources
- Avoiding Misinformation, Disinformation, and Dismediation

Chapter Ten: Refining and Evaluating Your Research Question

- Chapter Ten Objectives
- Refining Your Research Question
- Evaluating Your Research Question
- Advanced Tip: Writing an Abstract

Chapter Eleven: Research as an Inferential and Critical Process / Relating the Conceptual and the Concrete

- Chapter Eleven Objectives
- Research as an Inferential and Critical Process
- Relating the Conceptual and the Concrete

Chapter Twelve: Positing a Thesis Statement and Composing a Title / Defining Key Terms

- Chapter Twelve Objectives
- Positing a Thesis Statement and Composing a Title
- Defining Key Terms
- Formatting and Style Guidelines: MLA & APA

Chapter Thirteen: The Writing Process

- Chapter Thirteen Objectives
- Writer's Block
- Structures
- Revisions
- Writing Academic Prose

Avoiding Plagiarism and Additional Resources

- Avoiding Plagiarism
- Additional Resources
- Foundational Materials Assignment

CHAPTER ONE: UNDERSTANDING THE ASSIGNMENT / TYPES OF RESEARCH PROJECTS / PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Chapter One Objectives

This chapter introduces key aspects of the research process: understanding the assignment, types of research projects, and conducting preliminary research. While understanding the assignment may seem simple, it is frequently overlooked by students who often jump into research without a full understanding of the parameters of the project. This unit will provide an overview of understanding the assignment prompts, guidelines, and expectations as well as types of literary research papers, intended audience, and the purpose of the project.

In Conducting Preliminary Research, we discuss all that goes into this early investigative stage of the research process. Topics include how to conduct “pre-research” to investigate possible topics, why it’s a good idea to talk with experts, how to understand what types of resources you will need and where to find them, time management, setting benchmarks, and more. Preliminary research sets the foundation for more in-depth research to follow.

Learning Objectives

Focus on the most basic aspects of the research process. By reading this chapter and responding to the related discussion prompts, you will learn to

- understand the assignment before you start researching
- focus on problems and relevance in your research rather than on general topics
- recognize the importance of seeking out and talking to experts in your field and meeting with your subject librarian
- learn to set benchmarks and to take lots of notes.

Being diligent about this early stage will save you time later and decrease your stress throughout the process.

Understanding the Assignment

We discuss the following topics on this page:

- [Intended Audience for the Project](#)
- [Purpose of the Project](#)
- [Understanding the Assignment Prompts, Guidelines, and Expectations](#)
- [The Role of Analysis in Research Projects](#)
- [Key Takeaways](#)

Be sure you fully understand the assignment before you begin research. If there are terms in the assignment you don't understand or methods you don't yet know how to do, you will need to obtain this knowledge as soon as possible. The best source for information about your assignment is the person who gave the assignment (usually your instructor). For additional help understanding the assignment, visit the [UCF Writing Center](#).

Jada's assignment was to write a 10-12 page paper that analyzed a work of literature (she chose James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues") while employing two schools of criticism and citing five scholarly sources using the MLA format. This is a fairly common but deceptively complex literary studies research assignment. Instructors might also stipulate that your research includes biographical or historical information about your chosen subject. Other kinds of research can include textual analysis, comparative readings, genre studies, or theory-based approaches. We discuss various theories and methods in future modules. For now we will discuss four major types of research projects. These include 1) interpretive, 2) critical, 3) historical, and 4) creative.

Intended Audience for the Project

Audience awareness is an important aspect of good writing (and one we will discuss many times throughout this course). If your instructor does not stipulate an intended audience, assume you are writing for a journal of literary studies and that your classmates or other students and literary scholars are your imagined audience. It can be tempting to think of your instructor as your audience since they will be reading and grading your paper. However, you should avoid doing so unless told otherwise. Rather, think of your instructor as an editor who gives an assignment and evaluates your work for publication. The true “audience” in this case would be the readers of your real or imagined journal.

Different journals and conferences favor certain kinds of research over others and you should explore a few journals to see what kinds of research they publish. It is useful to review the submission guidelines for various literary journals and conferences to find out what kinds of research they prefer. Many journals publish articles with very specific formatting and methodology requirements, and learning about them can provide insight to beginning researchers. By studying the field, you can also be more prepared if or when you’re considering graduate school or are thinking about writing beyond class assignments. Publishing and presenting on a more professional level await!

Purpose of the Project

The typical purpose of a research paper in literary studies is to convince an audience to share your conclusion about a work of literature (or about a genre, a historical period, an author, a theory, etc.). Thus, you want to make a well-supported case to convince your reader to adopt your understanding and not some other understanding. The research method you choose (and your effectiveness in using it) will determine whether you succeed.

Understanding the Assignment Prompts, Guidelines, and

Expectations

It's common to begin a research project with a broad topic that you refine and focus throughout your research. Jada's journey started with a general interest in James Baldwin's short story, "Sonny's Blues," but became a more clear, complex, and focused question that drove her research.

First, Jada needed to know the parameters of the assignment. Instructors may provide a specific prompt focused on a particular literary work, an author, a literary form, a historical period, a theme, a theory, a method, or some other aspect of literary studies or the instructor may offer a choice of prompts. The instructor may require that your paper argue for or against a certain proposition. Alternatively the instructor may leave the assignment open-ended, requiring students to identify their own topic and produce their own prompt (otherwise known as a research question).

In addition, the instructor may list other requirements for your research project such as page length, number and type of sources, citation format, style guidelines, etc. Be sure to familiarize yourself with all these requirements before you begin your project; you don't want to get to the deadline only to realize you needed five more citations, your paper is five pages too short, and you don't know the difference between MLA and APA formats. The best source for information about the research paper guidelines is your instructor. If you have questions about the assignment or just want to go over the requirements before you begin your work, please ask your instructor for help. They are there to help you!

The Role of Analysis in Research Projects

Research projects should make **arguments**, which are not to be confused with **analysis**. An analysis does not necessarily pose any arguments. Any research project must include some analysis, but this analysis must be used to support an interpretive, critical, or historical claim (or to give a creative work some rhetorical agency).

Analytical work will help you better understand a literary text. The goal of analysis is

to describe what *type* a text is, how it *functions*, what its *parts* or *elements* are, and how it achieves its *effects*. You must do an analysis, but you should not stop with one; an analysis is a necessary step to creating an argument. Later in this course we will discuss how you use analysis to build your arguments.

Key Takeaways

Do

Understand all key terms and instructions in your assignment

Communicate first with your instructor to get clarification and advice about the assignment

Determine type of research paper you will be writing: Interpretive, critical, historical, or creative

Imagine your audience as readers of a journal in which your research article will appear

Write to convince/to persuade

Determine whether the assignment is limited in terms of subject or topic rather than open-ended

Familiarize yourself with requirements such as page length, citation format, style guidelines

Don't

Start work without a clear idea of what the assignment requires you to do

Begin by asking other people (not the instructor) to help you understand the assignment

Write a purely analytical or descriptive paper that lacks an argument

Imagine your audience as your instructor; the instructor is more like an editor than an audience

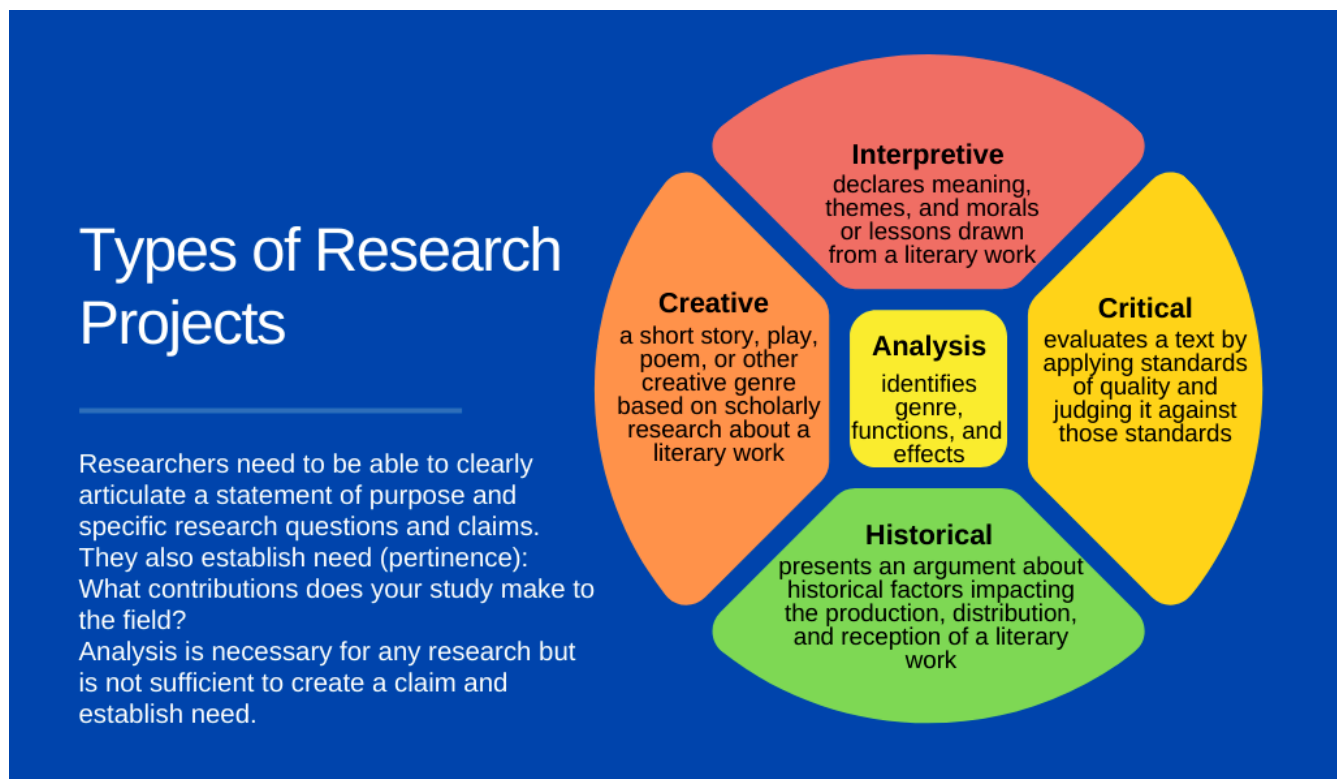
Write to (merely) inform

Assume that the assignment is open-ended unless clearly specified

Wait to figure out things like page length, citation format, style guidelines

The following pages will include more details about types of research projects, Jada's project, including short videos of her discussing her approach to finding resources, establishing relevance, refining and evaluating her research question, and managing her research.

Types of Research Projects



We describe four types of research projects on this page:

- [Interpretive](#)
- [Critical](#)
- [Historical](#)
- [Creative](#)

Your instructor may ask you to produce only one specific type or allow you to choose from among several. Please consult with your instructor if you are unsure what kind of project is acceptable.

Researchers begin each project by considering purpose:

- What are the specific hypotheses (claims) or research questions that your work examines?
- What pertinence does your research have for others? Another way of posing

the question is to ask: what contributions does your proposed study make to the field? This question is often answered by providing a review of existing scholarly literature and then demonstrating how your work fills a gap or in other ways clarifies, extends, or applies the work of others.

Research projects also include the following elements:

1. A specific description of the problem or topic being studied and a summary of the argument and its supporting elements, including any necessary definitions.
2. A statement of the significance of the problem or topic.
3. A review of the scholarly literature on the topic.
4. An explanation of the methodology and theoretical approach of the study describing what information is used, how it is applied to the topic of study, and why the methodology and theoretical approach were chosen.
5. A list of works cited and consulted that provides complete information for each reference mentioned in the literature review.

Interpretive Research Projects

An **interpretive** research project declares

- what a text *means*,
- what its major *themes* are, and
- what *morals* or *lessons* the reader should draw from it.

Example: Interpretive

An example of an *interpretive* claim is to be found in Frank Kermode's interpretation of Jesus' parable about the Sower of Seeds:

“For to him who has will more be given; and from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away.” To divine the true, the latent sense, you need to be of the elect, of the institution. Outsiders must content themselves with the manifest, and pay a supreme penalty for doing so. Only those who already know the mysteries—what the stories really mean—can discover what the stories really mean. (2-3)

Note that Kermode's interpretation of Jesus' parable is in conflict with other potential interpretations such as the claim that Jesus meant for his message to be heard and understood by everyone.¹

Critical Research Projects

A **critical** research project

- *evaluates* a text by applying *standards of quality* to the work, and
- *judges* it against those standards.

Example: Critical

An example of a *critical* research project is to be found in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. In Said's reading of the novel *Heart of Darkness*, by Joseph Conrad, he sees Conrad as criticizing imperialism but failing to call for its end. Said writes:

But Marlow and Kurtz are also creatures of their time and cannot take the next step, which would be to recognise that what they saw, disablingly and disparagingly, as a non-European 'darkness' was in fact a non-European world *resisting* imperialism so as one day to regain sovereignty and independence, and not, as Conrad reductively says, to reestablish the darkness. Conrad's tragic limitation is that even though he could see clearly that on one level imperialism was essentially pure dominance and land-grabbing, he could not then conclude that imperialism

1. Kermode, Frank. *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979.

had to end so that 'natives' could lead lives free from European domination. As a creature of his time, Conrad could not grant the natives their freedom, despite his severe critique of the imperialism that enslaved them. (30)²

Though Said recognizes that Conrad was a product of his time (the novel was published in 1899), he praises Conrad for his insights while criticizing him for his limitations. Said's criticism depends on a series of propositions about what counts as "good" literature about imperialism. We might summarize Said's propositions this way:

1. Literature about imperialism should identify imperialism as domination, violence, and slavery.
2. Literature about imperialism should recognize that native efforts to preserve their identities is resistance.
3. Literature about imperialism should call for an end to imperialism.

Heart of Darkness meets the first criteria but not the last two. We might disagree with Said's criteria, but if so we should be prepared to say what other criteria should be used. Note that Said is not criticizing the quality of the prose (he praises it). His primary concern is whether the literature supports or opposes imperialism.

Historical Research Projects

A **historical** research project presents an argument about

- *historical factors* impacting the *production, distribution, and reception* of a literary work, and
- it involves defining an object of study and a purpose, then collecting, reading, and analyzing your source materials.

2. Said, Edward W., and Said, Edward William. Culture and imperialism. United Kingdom, Vintage Books, 1994.

The reading should be both wide-ranging and intensive, and your critical judgment is required in the process. The way to maintain focus is to keep in mind the purpose of your study and the questions that you seek to answer. Your bibliography should include all the works referenced in your thesis.

Example: Historical

An example of a *historical* research project can be found below, in a paper by Maddison McGann, who argues that serialization—the publication of novels in installments in periodicals—changed the relationship among authors, readers, and critics.

The fact that critics like Poe were writing and publishing ‘alternative endings’ at the same time as they were reading the novel suggests that reading a serial novel in the mid-nineteenth century was neither a predetermined nor a passive experience; rather, it was a “choose your own adventure” game that allowed for unspoken collaboration to take place between authors and readers. The serial novel (and its subsequent shift in reviewing) enabled readers to become creators as well as consumers, thus changing the way that novels were read and received in mid-nineteenth-century Britain. (79)³

McGann’s research explores the real historical events upon which Dickens based his novel, Dickens’ production of the novel in serial form, and its reception by literary critics of his time, in this case the scathing reviews of Dickens’ novel written by Edgar Allen Poe.

Creative Research Projects

For a **creative** research project, such as a short story, play, poem, or other creative text based on scholarly research about a literary work, the idea must be determined in consultation with the professor. However, for acceptance, a creative project must include at least the following elements:

3. McGann, Maddison. "The Meaning of Prophets and the Making of Trolls: 19th-Century Reception of Charles Dickens’ *Barnaby Rudge*." *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (2020): 72-79.

- An explanation of why the specific form and genre were selected.
- A bibliography of all references used in the development of the creative thesis.
- A clear description of the nature, scope, and substance of the final creative product. For example, a dramatic adaptation that takes an alternate view of events.
- A discussion of the major elements of the craft used and how they will achieve certain aims or effects.

A creative research project has interrogatory components, which means that the researcher still asks critical questions and pursues answers to them. But creative research projects privilege invention over critique. In other words, the researcher must craft a response that goes beyond the traditional essay and does more “showing” than “telling.”

Example: Creative

An example of a *creative* research project is Connie Porter’s “Rapunzel across Time and Space.”

Maybe, once upon a time, the moon did show her other face, proudly, boldly, for just one night. It shone down on Earth below just as the other side does, bathed in silver light, brilliant in its fullness. But this face was dismissed for being what it was not—just like the other side. Since that night the moon turned that face forevermore into the darkness of space refusing to let anyone on Earth see it and was called fickle. She was hurt by being made fun of, for being called fickle and sang out her sorrow from the dark side of her face. People hear her voice on windless nights. Part of a chorus people used to call the music of the spheres. Its beauty haunts us, draws us to look up into the sky at night.

We want to hear her voice more clearly, but the moon will never turn its other face to us again. We will have to cross time and space to pull ourselves into her life, make a ladder of our own hair. Nappy. Curly. Straight. Braided. Dreaded. We will have to shave our own heads, all of us become baldheaded and beautiful, weaving a ladder that stretches to her to hear the full beauty of her voice, to see the beauty of the face cloaked in darkness. We will feel the power of her tears as they fall into our eyes. Though not blind, we will see that she was never the one who was fickle. We were. Then we will all live happily ever after. End of story. (282)⁴

4. Porter, Connie. “Rapunzel across Time and Space.” *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tale*. Kate Bernheimer, ed., pp. 273–282. New York: Anchor, 1998

In her work, Porter—a black female author—writes about an event in which she heard one of her readers use the word “baldheaded” to insult one of Porter’s fictional characters, a young black girl with short hair. The insult inspired Porter to rethink the familiar Rapunzel tale to see what it teaches us about hair, beauty, gender, and race. In re-reading “Rapunzel,” Porter discover that the prince is attracted not to Rapunzel’s hair but to her voice. Her hair is merely a means to an end: a rope for him to climb. Porter’s work is a hybrid: part reworking of the “Rapunzel” story, part personal essay, part literary research, and part polemic, arguing that we should encourage black girls to speak and that we should listen to them and appreciate their voices.

Suggested guidelines when doing a creative research project:

1. The introduction should discuss the literary theory or theories you are using, how you used them to read the literary work, and what your creative project is in relation to your research question.
2. The creative project is part of your research method in that it helps you answer your research question. For instance, let’s say we were wondering what impact gender has in the “Sleeping Beauty” stories by the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Giambattista Basile. One way to find out might be to switch the genders of the main characters and see what results.
3. The conclusion explains what you discovered or what resulted from the creative work.

Please read Chapter Four for information about literary theories and methods.

Exercises

1. Does your assignment allow you to choose from these types of research projects? Get clarification if necessary.
2. Which type of research project most appeals to you and why?
3. What are your thoughts about using analysis but going beyond it to make a claim and establish need?

4. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your responses in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussions area and find the Types of Research Projects Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Conducting Preliminary Research

We discuss the following strategies on this page:

- [The Invention Stage](#)
- [Time Management](#)
- [Investigate professional Organizations](#)
- [Talk to Experts](#)

Sometimes called “pre-research,” this is an inventive stage during which you investigate possible topics of interest. For example, once you fully understand your assignment, the next step might be to conduct some background research online. Also, talk to friends and classmates. And while it’s a good idea to try out your ideas with non-experts, the real test is to try them out with experts. If your ideas are not fully formed yet, you can ask experts to help guide you in the right direction. Undergraduate students often overlook this strategy, but it can be incredibly effective and it can lead to good research topics as well as good resources. Let’s take a closer look at some of these strategies.

- **The Invention Stage:** This can be a messy process, so keep a notebook to jot down ideas and questions as they occur to you. You’ll need to develop a research question, so those notes may come in handy later. Also, think about what types of sources you’ll need to complete your project. The assignment may specify certain types, such as scholarly **monographs** and journal articles, but what else might you need? What about media and other primary sources? Where would you find them? Should you explore digital archives or make an appointment with an archivist?
- **Time Management:** Think about time-management and set milestones. Even though pulling all-nighters is a rite of passage for college students, your stress will be greatly reduced (and the quality of your research enhanced) if you’re not racing to finish everything at the last minute. Be sure to keep those milestones simple and achievable so you don’t get overwhelmed by unrealistic goals. We encourage you to use a planner!
- **Investigate Professional Organizations:** Many famous authors have organizations dedicated to their legacy. One of these is [The William Faulkner Society](#), which assembles lists of scholarly

journals, conferences and conventions, research centers and information sources, and interdisciplinary university institutes. Many such organizations also provide scholarships for students. Look through the contents of author societies' websites, as well as recent journals and conference proceedings, to help you generate ideas for your own research.

- **Talk to Experts:** Finally, ask for help! You're attending a large university where you're surrounded by highly educated people. Don't be afraid to schedule appointments and conduct interviews with them. Also, consider meeting with the subject librarian in your major to get an overview of key resources and tools available at the library.

Literacy is more than the ability to read and write simple texts; our reading and writing skills advance in stages. Scholarship requires a very high level of literacy. Remember that all writers started as beginners and that even the most accomplished scholars are still engaged in a learning process.

Taking time to work through the preliminary research process will set the foundation for everything that comes after and it will make your job easier.

Exercises

1. List three things you have researched (they don't have to be related to school projects). Discuss your experiences with any of the research you listed. Which parts did you enjoy the most? Where did you have the most difficulty? Did you find what you were looking for? How valuable was the information and the experience? Write 150-300 words. You can answer each question separately or address them together.
2. If there are any elements of your assignment that need clarification, please list them in the discussion area. After raising these items with your instructor, please include their clarifications in the discussion area.
3. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your responses in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussions area and find the Preliminary Research discussion.
Participate in the discussion.

Advanced Tip: Calls for Papers



A “call for papers” (or CFP) is a request from a professional journal, conference, or other forum that asks scholars to submit research on a particular theme or subject. The CFP from a particular journal or other entity may pose a research question or series of questions that scholars should address in their work. Along with the theme and research question, the CFP will usually stipulate the length of the project (typically in word count or length of presentation), and other guidelines such as style (MLA, APA, Chicago, etc.).

Most CFPs in literary studies ask for proposals or abstract submissions before consideration of complete papers. An abstract is a brief overview of the work. A typical request is for an abstract of 500 words. If the abstract is approved, then you will receive an invitation requesting a completed work by a particular deadline.

Beginning and intermediate scholars who wish to continue in the field should familiarize themselves with a variety of CFPs. Doing so allows you to see what topics are currently being discussed, what kinds of guidelines researchers must follow for their work to be published, and what journals and professional platforms are available.

- UPenn <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/>
- HNet <https://networks.h-net.org/subject-fields/humanities>
- WikiCFP <http://www.wikicfp.com/cfp/call?conference=humanities>
- CFPList <https://www.cfplist.com/>

Your instructor may ask you to aim your course project towards a particular CFP, even if you don't decide to submit your work. Doing so is a great way to learn professionalization skills as you develop your research skills. If your instructor does not ask you to aim your work for publication, it is still a good idea for you to aim for one as a target. Many published research papers begin as class projects.

The value of a professional publication for a student's career is immense. It shows you have the skills to make it in this highly competitive world.

CHAPTER TWO: IDENTIFYING A PROBLEM / CONSIDERING AUDIENCE

Chapter Two Objectives

This chapter deals with three related issues:

- identifying a problem
- evaluating relevance
- considering audience

In literary studies, a problem can be a new issue or an old issue. When searching for a relevant research problem, you should first determine that there is an informed audience that will consider the issue significant, which means it is worthy of further discussion.

In the following pages, we explore relevance & purpose as they relate to possible research problems in James Baldwin's story, "Sonny's Blues." We use literary scholar Ann Dobie's work to show how to measure relevance using specific criteria such as materials, purpose, and method. This section also sets up Jada's forthcoming discussion about how she connected "Sonny's Blues" to her background and how she used her personal experiences to add a new perspective to this classic story.

Learning Objectives

You should come away from this chapter with a better understanding of

- how to identify a research problem and evaluate relevance using specific criteria
- what makes for a good research question
- how to develop audience awareness early in the research process

These concepts relate to the ideas of scholarship as conversation and searching as strategic exploration, which we will discuss in the following chapters.

Identifying a Problem

On this page we discuss the following themes:

- [Strategies for Generating Scholarly Problems](#)
- [Addressing Problems](#)
- [Relation of Problem to Audience](#)
- [Do Problems Need to Be “Original”?](#)

Many instructors and textbooks tell students to “identify a problem” for their research. When students learn they have to find a “problem,” they often think about an affliction, disaster, or catastrophe. But in the language researchers use, a problem is just something unknown or not understood, similar to the way math gives us problems. When facing a math problem, we ask “What is X?” The “problem” in math – X – is neither good nor bad. What you need to get started on a research project is something you want to know or understand; that *thing* is your problem. Then, with the research materials you discover, try to help your audience better understand that thing by making a claim about it. To help you learn how to identify the problem, we include the following passage from Aaron Ritzenberg and Sue Mendelsohn:

Strategies for Generating Scholarly Problems

Notice that each problem requires two parts. Like a rubber band that can only be stretched when you pull each end in opposite directions, a scholarly tension requires two elements to be at odds. For instance, merely noticing that something seems strange doesn't constitute a scholarly problem until the researcher places it in tension with a second element: what we think of as typical. As you read the highlighted passages, you'll notice that we have underlined language that indicates the kind of tension the author is calling attention to. As they research, scholars generate problems to drive their research by looking for tensions or dissonances between . . .

Common Understanding and Complication

Begin by observing a tension between the way others have understood the text and some aspect of the text that appears to diverge from that understanding.

Example: In this excerpt from his essay “The Trouble with Wilderness,” William Cronon complicates our common understanding of the idea of “wilderness” as a realm separated from civilization (passage highlighted in light gray). Cronon observes that, in fact, wilderness is a product of civilization (passage highlighted in dark gray):

The common understanding of wilderness

For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness. Seen in this way, wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves, a refuge we must somehow recover if we hope to save the planet. As Henry David Thoreau once famously declared, “In Wilderness is the preservation of the World.”

A complication: reasons to rethink the common understanding of wilderness

But is it? The more one knows of its peculiar history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems. Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. (7)

Locate this type of problem by first researching the common understanding. Then look for elements that this understanding can’t account for.

Consider the stakes by asking how this new complication might challenge the common understanding of the text.¹

A problem is not necessarily a bad thing to have. In fact, it can be a great thing to have! When we try to solve important problems, we advance our knowledge. A problem can be *technical* like how to design a bridge that withstands wind pressure and soil erosion; *philosophical* like how to understand the nature of being; *economic* like how to make our resources go further; *political* like how to ensure the rights of immigrants; or *historical* like how to understand why the U.S. government incarcerated approximately 120,000 Japanese-Americans during World War II. The best researchers identify research problems so rich and rewarding that they can

1. Aaron Ritzenberg and Sue Mendelsohn. *How Scholars Write*. Oxford University Press. 2020.

work on them throughout their careers and leave more work for future generations of researchers. Marie Curie's research problem was to understand radioactivity. Sigmund Freud's research problem was to understand how the mind worked. Zora Neal Hurston's research problem was to preserve and promote African-American culture. Though all three researchers died long ago, other researchers have continued their work. When we "plow the fields" of research established by others, we owe them a debt of gratitude, which we pay by continuing the tradition and passing it on to the next generation of researchers.

Addressing Problems

When working with math problems, we can say we *solved* the problem. In literary studies, not all problems can be solved definitively. Sometimes, as in the problem of interpreting a literary text, we get an answer that is *better* than one we had before. We often use the word "address" instead of "solve" in these cases. Thus, we might say that Joseph Campbell *addressed* the problem posed by the structure of myths. He didn't *solve* the problem definitively since other people have addressed this problem in different ways and have come up with different answers.

To address problems in literary studies, we do research. For example, to address the problem of interpreting an Emily Dickinson poem, we might look for critical texts. Even if you find well-known critical texts, perhaps you see them differently from how other people see them; your perspective and your insights help others better address the problem.

Sometimes a problem is well studied, like the examples listed above. Sometimes you discover a new problem and are introducing it for the first time. In literary studies, lots of unknown things are out there but not all of them are significant or worth knowing. For a problem to be significant, it means that an audience somewhere might care about it. For instance, perhaps we don't know how many words are in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. Just because the answer is unknown doesn't mean it is significant. Would the answer help us better understand the text or the author? Maybe not, or not much.

Also, consider whether the problem – the unknown thing – is too easy or too difficult

to answer and then avoid doing either. Using a computer and a text file of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, you could figure out how many words are in it quite easily, much faster than if you counted the words yourself. We should choose problems that are not this easy to answer. In any case, counting words in a novel makes little sense unless you can explain why doing so helps us to address another more significant problem, like whether audiences were consuming longer novels at the time or whether the length of a novel was a major consideration for publishers. Even then, providing a page count is probably sufficient.

Set aside questions that are too difficult to answer like the impact of Shakespeare's work on authors who came after him. Such a project would take an immense amount of research and require years of study, far more than you can do for a term paper. Just because a problem is too difficult for a smaller project, however, doesn't mean it is not worth pursuing. Measuring Shakespeare's impact on later authors is an important objective. What you can do in a term paper is manage a smaller part of such a big question. For instance, what impact did Shakespeare's work have on 20th century playwright August Wilson?

When you address a problem in literary studies, you should consider the history of the problem; have other people addressed it before? Weigh the significance of the problem; is it one that has relevance to the scholarly conversation? Finally, before exploring the problem in great detail, determine whether you can feasibly address the problem given your available time and other constraints.

Relation of Problem to Audience

To get a sense of whether a problem is worth addressing you need to imagine your audience. The audience for your research is other literary critics and scholars. The best way to get to know your audience is by reading what they write: works of literary criticism and scholarship. Your audience may range from novices (such as students) to experts (such as professors). In the writings of these literary scholars and critics, you will come to know what kinds of concerns they have and what problems they find relevant and significant. Your goal is to join the conversation by adding something of value.

Do Problems Need to Be “Original”?

By reading works of literary criticism and scholarship, you will find many significant problems. Great scholars are great problem-finders and they don't always have time to solve all the problems they discover. Sometimes they leave them for other people – like you – to work on. For your research project, you don't necessarily need to come up with an “original” problem unless your instructor asks you to do so, because literary criticism is not like math in which most problems have only one possible answer. Literary criticism and scholarship are more like law; in many legal cases, we can come to different interpretations of evidence and of the law itself. Let's say you find other works of literary criticism discussing the problem of [the color line](#) in the work of Langston Hughes. You can still address the same problem in your research project because you might have something new or different to say about the problem. You can add value by uncovering new information or by taking a different perspective on the problem.

Key Takeaways

Good research problems

Addresses an unexplored problem or proposes a novel solution to an old problem

Identifies a tension between common understanding and complications

Addressing the problem is a challenging yet manageable task

Audiences might care about it

Joins the conversation in critical literature

You might have something new or different to say about the problem

Poor research problems

Proposes a well known solution to a well known problem

Proposes unproved common understandings

The problem is too easy or too difficult to answer

Chances are no one would care about it

Unrelated to the conversation in critical literature

You are unlikely to have anything new or different to say about the problem

On the following pages we will discuss how to evaluate the relevance and purpose of the problem you've identified.

More resources:

Discover how to establish a [Problem Statement](#) that helps the reader understand the relevance of your research.



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Evaluating Relevance & Purpose

On this page, we explore the following themes and concepts:

- [Establishing Relevance](#)
- [Identifying Criteria](#)
- [Considering the Stakes](#)

Establishing Relevance

We enter the scholarly conversation by establishing relevance; we ask, “how is this work of literature, or my research about it, relevant and significant to my audience?” For example, Jada might ask why James Baldwin and “Sonny’s Blues” are still relevant to audiences today. What lessons can contemporary audiences learn from a story written in 1957? Conversely, how can new perspectives that we bring to old stories keep them relevant? Relevance is established by explaining why something matters. And things matter to us now because we have problems today that we want to solve (or address). Such problems may have broader implications for society, or for a specific group of readers such as scholars of African-American literature.

We don’t want to propose simple-minded answers to the question of relevance. For example, it is not enough to say that racism was a problem in 1957 and that it is still a problem today. The issue demands specificity. How is the past relevant to understanding the present? For example, do we see information or perspectives in “Sonny’s Blues” that could help us address racial profiling and police brutality today? Conversely, does knowing about the current movement against systemic racism help us better understand what Baldwin was writing in 1957? Can we read the story as a message to future generations? Is there a problem related to scholarship about “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin, African- American literature, or literature of the 1950s that your work can help us better understand? Becoming familiar with the conversations among scholars and the general public can help you assess whether

and how much your claims are relevant.

Identifying Criteria

Relevance and significance in literary studies are measured against established **criteria**. Every field of knowledge establishes criteria. For instance, medicine establishes criteria to determine what counts as health. Political science establishes criteria for what constitutes a democracy. Mathematics establishes criteria for what counts as a formal proof. We advance in our fields by learning these criteria and making use of them in strategic ways. People who are very advanced in their fields may introduce changes to these criteria or introduce new ones.

Example

In scholar Ann Dobie's chapter "More Cultural Studies: Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism,"¹ she discusses the Black Aesthetic, a concept that artists involved in the [Black Arts Movement](#)² established in the 1960s when James Baldwin was in his prime as a prominent author and activist. The Black Aesthetic established criteria for determining what counts as "good" literature (at least among literary works that addressed black experience) and what doesn't. In her text, Dobie discusses three key criteria for the Black Aesthetic: the materials its artists work with, the purpose of their work, and how they go about it.

- **Materials:** Black history is the source material, which Dobie says is unique because it creates a dual identity, "one that both partakes of America and doesn't, one that shares the American experience but is denied it."
- **Purpose:** Dobie says, "African American artists have a strong imperative to reclaim their culture by defining what is of value to them. Such a reclamation takes place by remembering history, defining identity, gaining recognition, and celebrating blackness."
- **How they go about it:** Dobie notes that while African American artists may not go about their work differently from others, they are unique in that they draw from "folk traditions that express

1. Dobie, Ann. "More Cultural Studies: Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism," *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. Third Edition. Boston, MA. Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2012. 216-226.

2. Note: This course uses Wikipedia (and other open sources) to provide background information on a variety of topics. Wikipedia, like any source, does have [deficiencies](#), some of which are discussed on their own site. Wikipedia articles also include links to other sources, which makes them good places to start the research process.

their beliefs, values, and social mores.” She also cites Ron Karenga who states that the purpose of African-American art is “to make revolution. Its collective nature is evident in its presentation of real life and real people, and it is committed to permanent revolution.”

Dobie adds, “To approach a text from a multicultural perspective, a reader must look for more than material, purpose, and method.” Readers must also “anticipate specific characteristics that distinguish their work.” These characteristics could include issues such as voice and narration.

Thus, when reading “Sonny’s Blues,” we can read it with these specific criteria in mind and judge the story according to the criteria. Doing so is not the end of the research process for a critical paper, but is a crucial part. Keep in mind that the Black Aesthetic is one set of criteria but is far from the only one you could apply to “Sonny’s Blues.”

We judge things, like literary works, against a set of standards. Many literary theories establish criteria for evaluating literary works. Another set of criteria we could apply to Baldwin’s work comes from Cleanth Brooks and the formalist critics.

- Organic unity – all the parts of the literary work are interrelated and support its central idea.
- Tensions – paradoxes, ironies, and ambiguities that the literary work resolves into a thematic unity. In “Sonny’s Blues,” we might say that Sonny was seeking to destroy himself through drugs yet he was also seeking to express himself through music. The tension between self-destruction and self-expression is thematically unified in the blues.

In literary theories, which we discuss in another chapter, we find many sets of criteria we can use in our literary criticism (notice the shared root of the word “criteria” and “criticism”). Your paper should explain and justify why you chose a set of criteria and excluded others.

Considering the Stakes

Another way to establish relevance is by considering the stakes of an argument.

The “stakes” means the consequences of an argument being accepted or rejected. What could be won or lost if the argument is accepted? For instance, could an argument about a particular literary work (or works) change the paradigm of how we study literature? If so, these are enormous stakes because it means established perspectives and methods might be abandoned and new perspectives and methods adopted.

Examples of high-stakes literary research:

1. Henry Louis Gates' Study of “signifyin’” black tradition in literary works such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*.
2. Edward Said's study of “Orientalism” in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
3. Mikhail Bakhtin's study of “dialogism” in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novels.
4. Viktor Shklovsky's reading of “defamiliarization” in Leo Tolstoy's novels.
5. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's identification of a “minor literature” in the works of Franz Kafka.
6. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's study of the “Madwoman in the Attic” in Emily Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.
7. Marjorie Garber's study of “transvestite logic” in the works of William Shakespeare.

These works are now anthologized in collections of literary theory and criticism but were once seen as radical shifts or groundbreaking new directions in literary studies research. They achieved their high position because they were recognized as extremely relevant to the problems of their day. These literary researchers played for high stakes and won. But because the stakes of their work are high, it is not uncommon for other critics to challenge their work. For example, Gilbert and Gubar's work has been challenged by Judith Butler, Mary Daly, and Tori Moi, among others.

“Low stakes” problems are still important to address. The size of the stakes are determined by the possible outcome. Generally, we ask “if X is true, what are the consequences”? So, for instance, if we produce a new interpretation of a Shakespeare sonnet, is it the kind of interpretation that changes our mind about one poem, about Shakespeare's poetry in general, about poetry in general, about literature in general, or about life in general? A small stake would be an answer that changes our mind about one poem but not so much beyond that.

Thomas Kuhn wrote a widely cited book titled *The Structure of Scientific Revolu-*

tions in which he argued that most scientific research is “normal science,” meaning it doesn’t change our fundamental understanding of the world but just elaborates on it or solves smaller problems. “Revolutionary science,” by contrast, changes the way we see the world in fundamental ways. So Darwin’s theory of evolution is revolutionary, whereas a particular study within that paradigm – such as about the evolution of a fruit fly population – would be normal science. Normal science is still extremely important. Maybe it matters a great deal that we know how fruit flies evolve, but the answer probably does not involve a paradigm shift. Basically, the higher the stakes, the greater the relevance. Darwin’s theory of evolution was extremely high stakes and extremely relevant to all of science, particularly biology, as well as to almost all human thought. The “problem” Darwin was addressing initially seemed to be fairly low stakes; why do finches on one island have short beaks while finches on another island have longer beaks? Yet the answer – that species changed through natural selection – was enormously relevant to many other problems. Low stakes means the research has narrow implications and high stakes means the research has broad implications.

We will discuss the importance of establishing relevance more in-depth once we get into the “refining Your Research Question” portion, but it is important to keep the issue in mind early in the research process as well.

Key Takeaways

Establishing relevance:

Dos

Make a case for why the research matters to audiences today

Be specific about how it matters

Recognize the “stakes” of your argument

Establish relevance in terms of recognized criteria such as the Black Aesthetic

Don’ts

Assume your audience will see the relevance without your help

Leave things vague as in “racism still exists.”

Ignore the stakes of your argument

Argue relevance without referring to recognized criteria

Exercises

1. How does the issue of relevance change your understanding of the research process?
2. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussion are and find the Evaluating Relevance/Purpose Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Considering Audience

When you write literary scholarship and criticism, you are writing *for* someone: your audience. The audience may be real or imagined; in other words, there may be a real group of people who will read your work or you might just be writing a practice work at this point in your research career. Whether your audience is real or imagined at this point, you need to consider your audience as you prepare to research and write your project. Scholarly disciplines measure the impact of research by gauging how audiences respond. Critical reviews and commentary provide qualitative feedback. We can also learn how other researchers re-use your work within their own; advanced researchers use tools such as the [h-index](#) to measure how their research is referenced in other people's research. Sometimes impact is more subtle and may not be measurable in such quantitative ways. For instance, audience impact occurs when your readers gain insight or consider a problem from a new perspective. They may not all respond in a measurable way.

One of your goals as a researcher – beyond finding and addressing problems – is to impact your audience, and you want that impact to be positive. In other words, you don't want your audience to hold up your research as an example of bad work! You want your audience to appreciate your research for its wise choice of problem, its appropriate methodology, its powerful use of sources, its airtight reasoning, its relevant conclusion, and its faultless presentation. You want to impact your audience's thinking about a problem just as an attorney wants to impact the jury's thinking about a case.

Your research should impact your audience rhetorically, meaning your work convinces your audience to take your side in a (potential) dispute, to see things the way you see them. The Roman rhetor, Cicero, said that rhetoric was *Docere, Delectare, Movere*: to teach, to delight, to move. To move someone, rhetorically, means to convince them to shift their beliefs. We are more likely to move our audience when we adopt the strategies of good teacher, and delight our audiences while doing so. Good literary research should convince your audience, and be enjoyable to them at the same time.

In general, if you are writing literary criticism or theory, you are appealing to an

audience of other literary scholars. These scholars may be beginners or experts or some combination of both. Literary studies is part of a knowledge apparatus that involves people fulfilling different functions. These functions include researchers, teachers, students, editors, publishers, librarians, conference attendees, and many others. They all work together to advance their discipline and its goal, which is to improve the understanding of literature and its impact in the world.

Everything you do as a researcher, from selecting a problem to proofreading your final draft, should include consideration for your audience. Each researcher must make the audience's experience as effortless as possible, but not so easy that it oversimplifies the research. If the subject is complicated, you need to explain the complications. But don't overly complicate the reader's experience by adding extraneous information, repeating points unnecessarily, using specialized terminology without offering definitions, or writing in a self-indulgent way.

Also, always imagine your audience as being critical – not that they are evaluating *you* necessarily – but that they are evaluating your claims. Thus, avoid making assumptions or unsubstantiated claims in your writing and don't leave logical gaps. Be sure to address **counterclaims** that your audience may consider. You should always anticipate your audience's thoughts by imagining what questions they might ask, in which order, and by addressing these questions systematically in your work.

Expect that not everyone will like our work, even if it is great. We need to have some thick skin in the face of criticism. But what other people think of our work does matter to some extent. We are writing for an audience we wish to persuade, and if they are not persuaded then we have failed. Failure is not the end of the world. It means we may need to rethink our argument, or try a more receptive audience, or wait until conditions are right. The scholarly conversation is an ongoing and iterative process and we all learn from it.

Key Takeaways

Imagining your audience effectively

You prioritize your audience in every step of the research process

You write primarily for an audience of scholars and critics in your field

You try to maximize the impact of your work

You make the audience's experience as effortless as possible

You imagine a critical audience and address their concerns in your work

Imagining your audience ineffectively

You don't think about your audience, or only do so at the end of your research process

You write primarily for your teacher or for people outside your field

You don't consider the impact of your work

You make the audience's experience unnecessarily difficult

You imagine an uncritical audience or you don't address concerns that a critical audience might raise about your work

Exercises

1. What is your concept of the word "problem" as it relates to literary studies?
2. What steps will you need to take to better understand your audience?
3. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussion area and find the Identifying a Problem and Considering Audience Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

CHAPTER THREE: SEARCHING AS STRATEGIC EXPLORATION / SCHOLARSHIP AS CONVERSATION

Chapter Three Objectives

How do we begin our research exploration? How do we join the scholarly conversation?

Two key components to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) information literacy framework are Searching as Strategic Exploration and Scholarship as Conversation. In Searching as Strategic Exploration, they emphasize that, “Searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops.” In other words, research is a complex, recursive process that involves inquiry, discovery, audience awareness, and [serendipity](#).

Likewise, regarding Scholarship as Conversation, the ACRL notes that, “Instead of seeking discrete answers to complex problems, experts understand that a given issue may be characterized by several competing perspectives as part of an ongoing conversation in which information users and creators come together and negotiate meaning.” Good research questions typically don’t have a single uncontested answer. Rather, they are designed to engage scholars in an ongoing conversation that adds to the discourse in their field.

This conversation often begins within your paper as you engage with the work of other scholars. Some research projects provide a literature review, which is a section that presents your overview of the existing research in relation to a topic or problem. If the assignment does not call for a literature review to be included with the project, you should still conduct one. Doing so will help you understand the work of other scholars and gather background information for your research.

Learning Objectives

These concepts can be difficult for beginning researchers who may feel uncomfortable conversing with more experienced scholars. However, the goal with these two pages is

- to explain how to enter a scholarly conversation
- overcome the [anxiety of influence](#) (the fear that your work will be derivative)

You accomplish these goals by identifying gaps in research and establishing relevance. You're not an outsider merely stringing together other people's ideas, but part of an ongoing discussion. You're engaged with the research and you have something to contribute to the conversation, and you've chosen a topic that you are truly interested in (if you were allowed a choice).

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Searching as Strategic Exploration is a cornerstone of the Association of College and Research Libraries' (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy: "Searching for information is often nonlinear and iterative, requiring the evaluation of a range of information sources and the mental flexibility to pursue alternate avenues as new understanding develops." Further, "The act of searching often begins with a question that directs the act of finding needed information. Encompassing inquiry, discovery, and serendipity, searching identifies both possible relevant sources as well as the means to access those sources."

We will take a closer look at these ideas in this chapter by focusing on the following concepts:

- [Inquiry](#)
- [Discovery](#)
- [Serendipity](#)

Inquiry

Many students jump into the literature review without establishing a successful search strategy. Taking a shortcut here can lead to frustration and discouragement down the road. Before you begin your review, take some time to consider the following points:

- Determine the scope of your project and your information needs;
- Identify what types of information you might need and how you will access that information. Your options might include scholarly books, journal articles, film and media, art, statistics, and demographics;
- Match your information needs and search strategy to the appropriate subject databases;

- Refine your strategy based on the quality and relevance of your results.

For a more detailed overview of this approach, let's watch Jada discussing the early stages of her research about the James Baldwin short story, "Sonny's Blues":



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=67#oembed-1>

Note how Jada began by conducting basic background research online. She specifically sought out interviews and videos with Baldwin so she could hear him discuss his motivations and influences in his own words. While this type of information is not considered scholarly per se, it adds context to the story, which helped Jada be more strategic as she transitioned from online searching to the literature databases available through the UCF Libraries.

When creating your search strategy, emphasize strategic keywords. Unlike popular search engines, databases don't respond well to long queries or phrases. They are designed around subject terms and keywords. Once you begin searching the databases, be aware of the keywords and subject terms located within the article records. They can guide your search and help you learn the language of the field. What types of terminology or jargon do literature scholars use? Even a slight variation can make a significant difference in the quality of your results. In a forthcoming page titled [Database Search Strategies](#), we offer advice on how to search effectively.

Discovery

As Jada began searching key literature databases such as [MLA](#) and [JSTOR](#), she broke her broad search into strategic keywords that yielded high-quality scholarly articles. Before searching the databases, you should take a few minutes to break your topic into keywords.

Tips for Generating Keywords

- Brainstorm possible keywords about your topic before you start searching and think of synonyms.
- Avoid long phrases and queries. Databases are designed around keywords and subject terms. If you have a research question, break it into keywords before you start searching (they talk about how to do this in the above video).
- Begin searching in a database (such as MLA) by entering those terms into the search field and notice that the database will provide possible alternatives. So, searching “Race” as a general keyword generates alternate terms as Race AND gender, ethnicity, minority, discrimination, relations, education, and America.
- However, sometimes it helps to start with a broad search and use the database limiters to help you narrow and focus. For example, “race” generates 19,528 results in MLA. Open the subject limiter in the sidebar that extracts subject terms from the records and breaks them down by which recur most often. That tool is designed to help researchers narrow and focus as they’re searching and there may be some new terms in there as well.
- Once you start finding some relevant result, dig deeper by mining the article record and noting the subject terms and author-supplied keywords (if any), then read the abstract and introduction and highlight any new terms you find there. Pay particular attention to the author-supplied keywords when they appear because those are there to attract like-minded scholars to that article and they can provide clues as to what types of terms other researchers are using.
- Emphasize that this is an act of strategic exploration that involves a lot of trial and error.

A brainstorming activity based on James Baldwin and “Sonny’s Blues” might look something like this:

Example

Key terms:

Keyword A: James Baldwin

Keyword B: Sonny’s Blues

Keyword C: African American literature/writers

Keyword D: African American short stories

Keyword E: Marxism
Keyword F: Race/Racism
Keyword G: Ethnic/black identity
Keyword H: Masculinity/African American Men
Keyword I: Autobiography
Keyword J: Civil Rights
Keyword K: Ethnomusicology
Keyword L: Jazz/Harlem Renaissance
Keyword M: Race relations
Keyword N: Gender studies/sexuality
Keyword O: Activism/social justice

This is just a preliminary list that will grow once we start searching, but it provides a sense of how to break Jada's broad topic into strategic keywords, each of which opens new possibilities. While creating your list, avoid using overly generic terms such as "short story" or "novel." You will get far too many results and the vast majority of them will not be helpful to you.

For more information about refining your search with subject terms, search limiters, and strategic keywords, please watch the following videos from the Libraries' [Research tips Thursdays](#) webinar series.

Subject Terms: Use Them To Your Advantage:



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Using Search Limiters:



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Keywords Pack-A-Punch:



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Also, when entering your terms into the database, try to strategically combine terms such as “Baldwin AND Civil Rights” or “Sonny’s Blues AND Harlem Renaissance.” These combined terms will help narrow and focus your results and will save you time. Also, you can search for particular characters in a story to get more refined results.

Creating a successful search strategy involves some trial and error. Explore a variety of databases and alter your keywords. Eventually, you’ll find the combination that yields the best results.

Once you find a good scholarly paper on your topic, you can use it to search for additional resources by mining its works cited. Even if the article itself is not the most useful to your research, the author may cite other sources that are important to your work. Then look at the works cited section of the next article, and then next, and so on.

Another good place to begin your search is in reference materials. The library has a large section of reference books (many of them have now moved online) and they present general overviews as well as lists of additional resources. A reference librarian will be able to point you in the right direction.

Serendipity

Researchers rarely go to the library stacks for one book and come back with one book; they come back with an armful of books and the serendipitous discoveries they make while browsing are often the most valuable.

Serendipity is an important part of the discovery process. While it’s good to be strategic, it’s also wise to be open to unexpected discoveries that may impact the scope of your research. Jada used the river and tributary analogy to account for the serendipity of her research process. The river is the main stream of books and arti-

cles in the library catalog and subject databases. The tributaries, however, are the unexpected discoveries and diversions you make that can have a profound impact on your research.

The unexpected discovery in Jada's case was an article entitled, "The Sociology of the Ghetto in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues.'" She discovered this article by expanding her research beyond the key literature databases to bring a more interdisciplinary perspective into her paper. In doing so, she discovered the sociologists were interested in the same issues that influenced Baldwin's work, which in turn shed new light on her background and experiences with race and class.

While it's difficult to plan for a serendipitous discovery, you can enhance your chances by doing as Jada did: Expanding the scope of your research to multiple perspectives and being open to unexpected discoveries.

Keep these concepts in mind as we move into entering the scholarly conversation, arguing for relevance, and establishing criteria.

Exercises

1. Do you have a coherent plan for beginning your research? What is your plan? If not, what parts of the plan need to be more clearly defined?
2. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

By clicking the link below you can write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussion area and find the Searching as Strategic Exploration Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Scholarship as Conversation

Related to Searching as Strategic Exploration is the idea of Scholarship as Conversation. From the Framework for Information Literacy: “Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.” They further add that, “Instead of seeking discrete answers to complex problems, experts understand that a given issue may be characterized by several competing perspectives as part of an ongoing conversation in which information users and creators come together and negotiate meaning.”

We will explore the idea of scholarship as conversation in this module by focusing on the following key concepts:

- [Entering the Conversation](#)
- [Overcoming the Anxiety of Influence, or Making a Convincing Argument with You as the Authority](#)
- [Identifying Gaps](#)
- [Establishing Relevance](#)

Entering the Conversation

The conversation analogy can help us grasp the meaning and purpose of audience awareness, a concept that is new to many students. Academic communities revolve around questions researchers ask that move the conversation about a specific topic or problem forward. They converse with each other through the research they present at conferences and publish in scholarly books and journals. Before we discuss this concept more in-depth, let’s watch Jada discuss her approach to entering the scholarly conversation pertaining to James Baldwin and “Sonny’s Blues.”

—



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=76#oembed-1>

Jada's experience growing up in the Bronx, and her father's interest in Jazz, gave her a natural connection to the themes in "Sonny's Blues" and served as her entry into the conversation about Baldwin, class, and **critical race theory**. Jada's background directed her to certain kinds of scholarship, which added texture and depth to her personal story and her reading of Baldwin.

Overcoming the Anxiety of Influence, or Making a Convincing Argument with You as the Authority

Many beginning researchers suffer from "the anxiety of influence": the fear of appearing as a mere imitator to a more established scholar. This fear often leads students to make the mistake of avoiding other texts because they believe it will influence them too much and thus will quash their original ideas. But original ideas don't come from nowhere; they arise from our engagement with other texts. "Influence" is a tricky word since it implies that the past is acting upon you. But you, as the scholar, are in the driver's seat. You select ideas from those around you and arrange them in ways that convincingly make the case you set out to make. Of course, you need to cite any ideas that are not your own and give credit where it is due. But you are responsible for the finished product.

Think of this responsibility – of being the authority – as being similar to that of a museum curator. The curator is usually presenting other people's work but is doing so to make a point or share a point of view. The curator is responsible for knowing about the material and not misrepresenting it. The same is true for you as you write your paper.

Another analogy for positioning yourself as the authority is to the tour guide. The tour guide uses the following methods to establish authority and a point of view:

- Tell people where you are going (introduction)

- Along the way, tell them about the significance of what they will see
- While there, point to each item and explain its significance and its relationship to the other items
- On the way home (the conclusion of your essay), summarize the main points

The key here is to decide what the significance is. For example, if I am taking a group of people on a tour of the pyramids in Egypt, my focus might be on Egyptian mythology and my point might be that it contributed to Judeo-Christian beliefs and culture. Then everything I point out at the site will keep to that point. Perhaps I want instead to focus on the significance of the division of labor in ancient Egypt. Then I will discuss work, technology, and money, and I might point to evidence about how workers lived and about the tools they used. In other words, we must decide what significance we make of the materials. The most effective way to convey significance is by focusing on the consequences of the argument. Since X is true, then Y. Example: since ancient Egyptian society had skilled craftsmen and precise tools, they must have had a way to teach their technical skills to succeeding generations.

The anxiety of influence often leads students to the “hit and run” citation style: papers consisting of quotes strung together with little context or analysis. Always comment on quotes and incorporate them into your argument. Your readers want to know what you think and how you think. Show readers how you think by leading them through a series of inferences. Imagine your work as a conversation with others in the field, be engaged and engaging, and always keep in mind why your argument is important.

Additionally, consider the following advice from [Harvard College Writing Center](#):

As the writer of an essay, imagine yourself crossing a river, guiding a troop of avid readers. You bring an armful of stones to lay down and step on as you go; each stone is a sentence or paragraph that speaks to and develops the essay’s thesis, or central question. If you find yourself in the middle of the river with another mile to shore but only a few more stones, you can’t finesse such a situation. You can’t ask your readers to follow you and jump too broad a span. In such a case, stop. Ask yourself if you need more stones—more sentences or paragraphs—or if perhaps you have already used ones that more properly belong ahead. On a second look, you may decide that the distance between stones is not that great, after all; perhaps your reader only needs a hand of assistance to get from one stone, or para-

graph, to the next.

Identifying Gaps

Many researchers find productive problems by looking for gaps in the published research. “Gaps” refers to areas of research that have yet to be fully explored. They may be neglected or overlooked areas but they can also be tensions and contradictions in the research. To go back to the conversation analogy, gaps, tensions, and contradictions are identified through the ongoing debate among scholars. Identifying gaps is accomplished by conducting a literature review and asking critical open-ended questions – such as who, what, when, where, why, and how – about your findings. Your goal is to contribute something unique that will generate new knowledge, help solve a problem, and keep the conversation going. Filling a gap in knowledge is often a “low stakes” exercise since it accepts the paradigm of knowledge – the big picture – and works to fill in the margins. Imagine a large mosaic where the general outline and main features are done, but not all the areas are filled in. Think of these unfinished areas as the “gaps.”

Establishing Relevance

We introduced the idea of relevance and purpose in Unit 2 where we noted that relevance is an entry into the scholarly conversation and that it can be evaluated against specific criteria. “Sonny’s Blues” raises questions about the impact of systemic racism on black individuals and families, and it celebrates the creativity and resilience of black culture, making the story relevant to a large audience so many years later. The similarities between Jada’s experiences and Baldwin’s literary work and biography motivated her to do the research. But Jada has to consider whether including her personal story in the writing will be relevant to her audience or necessary to address her research question.

Exercises

1. Have you ever worried about the need to be “original” in your writing? Explain.
2. Has the fear of being “influenced” by other writers held you back from reading them and studying their work? Explain.
3. Do you agree with the idea that writers who make original contributions tend to know more, not less, about other writers in their field? Explain.
4. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the discussion area and find the Participate in the Scholarship as Conversation Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

CHAPTER FOUR: THEORY, METHODOLOGIES, METHODS, AND EVIDENCE

Chapter Four Objectives

This chapter covers related topics: *theory*, *methodology*, *method*, and *evidence*. Engagement with a specific *theory* can help guide your research. For example, Jada applied [Critical Race Theory](#) (CRT) to her interpretation of “Sonny’s Blues.” This choice helped Jada establish the parameters of her literature review and allowed her to be strategic when she was searching journals and databases. Having this theory helped Jada interpret Baldwin’s work and helped guide her research process as well. Each theory comes with a set of *methodologies*, which are assumptions and research practices. For instance, Critical Race Theory often entails an examination of [intersectionality](#): the ways in which identity categories like race, class, gender, nationality, and sexual orientation combine and play out in various situations. CRT may also involve other methodologies such as [standpoint epistemology](#) and [structural determinism](#). A CRT research project would require study of the theory and its associated methodologies before you begin your major research efforts into the literary work.

Once you’ve identified a problem you’d like to research and a theory (or theories), you’ll need to choose research *methods* that are appropriate for your project and some knowledge about how to use them. Research methods are about where and how you search to get answers to your research questions. Are you conducting interviews? Visiting archives? Doing close readings? Reviewing scholarship? You will need to choose which methods are most appropriate to use in your research and you need to gain some knowledge about how to use these methods. The methods module provides a quick overview with descriptions of some approaches that are common in literary studies. How do theory and method differ? A good rule of thumb is that a theory is an explanation and a method is a practice. Freudian theory, for example, is an explanation about human psychological development. Dream interpretation is an example of a Freudian method; it is a procedure for gathering information and understanding what is going on in someone’s mind.

Research methods are all about gathering [evidence](#). This evidence, comprised of facts and reasoning, aims to convince your audience to accept your conclusions about the literary work. The most important piece of evidence in your research is the literary work itself, which is a “fact” that can be witnessed by your audience.

Research means finding more facts about the literary work and tying them together with reasoning.

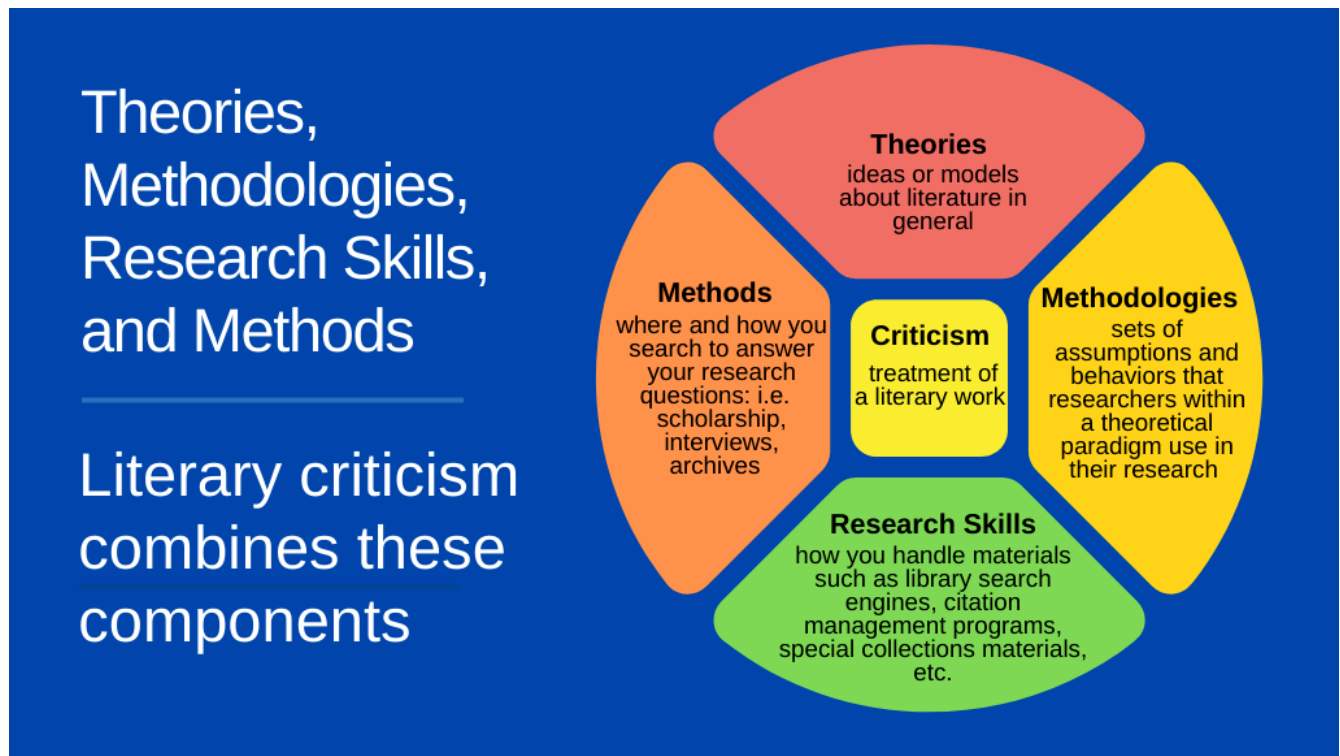
Learning Objectives

The key takeaway from this chapter are:

- a better understanding of theory's integral role within literary criticism, and
- how theory relates to particular research methodologies and methods to gather evidence.

Theory is often understood as a lens through which we look at an object (such as a literary work). Each literary theory provides a different lens. These “lenses” can make it seem we are reading radically different literary works, even if they are just different readings of the same work. Each theory relates to some research methods more strongly than others. As you explore theoretical approaches, methodologies, and methods, think about the effects of these various lenses and be aware that the theory lens you choose will determine which methods will most help you accomplish your research goals.

Theory Guides Inquiry



We discuss the following key subjects on this page:

- [Theory](#)
- [Methodologies](#)
- [Criticism](#)
- [Method](#)

Theory

Theory is an idea or model about literature in general (rather than about a specific literary work). A theory can account for

- *what* things are

- *why* they are the way they are, and
- *how* and *why* they work

Theories can be about physical things, like people or books, or abstract concepts, like *patriarchy*, love, or *being*. The English word *theory* derives from an Ancient Greek word *theoria*, meaning “a looking at, viewing, beholding.” In contrast to practical ways of knowing, theory usually refers to contemplative and reflective ways of knowing.

Theory is full of terminology and concepts that tend to grow and form recognizable shapes as we conduct research. These concepts are similar to those little sponge critters: the kind that come in capsules and expand when you leave them in water. The theory *term* is the compressed critter in the capsule and the fully explained *concept* is the expanded sponge critter. Advanced theorists and critics often use just the terminology (or the capsule, in our ‘sponge critter’ analogy) as a kind of shorthand conversation with one other. However, researchers who are unfamiliar with a theorist’s terminology have to expand their knowledge of the terminology (the capsule) by conducting additional analysis. By completing this additional analysis, researchers can come to understand the each concept’s relationships to other concepts (or the expanded sponge critter, in our analogy). Once we have expanded the terminology (capsule) into the concepts (sponge critter), we can realize how valuable and significant these concepts are to our particular field of study.

Examples of Theory Terms

Below are a few terms (and their definitions) that start with the letter “A” selected from a single book by theorist Gregory Ulmer (who borrows terms from many theoretical discourses and even invents some of his own):

- Abductive reasoning – from thing to rule.
- Abject – a formless value, not yet recognized.
- Alienation – separation from one’s capacity to act; the basis of compassion fatigue.
- Allegory – like a parable, a story with a moral linked via metaphor to another story.
- Aporia – a blind spot, an impasse, a dilemma, an inability to move ahead, or conventionally, an inability to choose between sets of equally desirable (or undesirable) alternatives.
- Apparatus – technology, institutional practices, and subject formation.
- Arabesque – an ornamental design of interlaced patterns of repeated shapes (floral or geo-

metric) said to be the most typical feature of Islamic aesthetics.

- Aspectuality – an image whose intelligibility is determined by the aspect of the viewer; the duck-rabbit, for example.
- ATH (até) – blindness or foolishness in individual, calamity and disaster in a collective.
- Attraction and repulsion – two poles (the sublime and the excremental).
- Attunement (*stimmung*) – the feeling that this is how the world is; results from mapping discourses.
- Aura – a sign of recognition.¹

We don't expect you to learn the terms in this list; we provide them to show how dense and complicated theory can be. Notice how the definitions for each theory term above contain even more terms – like “formless,” “compassion fatigue,” and “blind spot” – that need further unpacking. Theory tends to be very dense; it crams lots of ideas into every page. Entire dictionaries are devoted to literary theory terms (see for instance Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi. *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*. Columbia University Press, 1995). There are entire dictionaries dedicated to the terms used by a single theorist (see for instance Dylan Evans. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 2006).

Literary scholars use **theories** to frame their perspectives of literary works. Each theory is like a different “lens” through which to view a literary work and changing lenses gives us very different views of a work. Below are a few examples of major literary theories (this list is nowhere near complete!):

Major Literary Theories

- **Audience studies** look at how a particular text was received in its day. Such studies might involve reading critical reviews from the period, looking at promotional materials, overall sales, and re-use of a text by other writers or artists. More recently, it could involve studying online communities and their uses and responses to a literary text.

1. Barry J. Mauer. "Introduction," "A Glossary for Greg Ulmer's Avatar Emergency," and "A Glossary for Greg Ulmer's Electronic Monuments." *Text Shop Experiments*, Volume 1. 2016 <http://textshopexperiments.org/textshop01/ulmer-glossaries>

- **Cultural studies** theories, such as New Historicism, Post-colonialism, or Multiculturalism, look at how texts use discourses to represent the world, social relations, and meanings. Cultural studies theories also examine the relationships of these discourses to power: how groups in power use particular discourses to justify their power and how those with less power negotiate these discourses and generate their own discourses.
- **Ecological studies** examine the ways that human and natural environments are represented in texts.
- **Feminist studies** examine the way gender and sexuality shape the production and distribution of texts, or they examine the representation of gender in texts.
- **Genre studies** explore what features constitute a literary genre and whether or how well a text meets these expectations, deviates from them (successfully or unsuccessfully), or establishes new genre expectations.
- **Linguistic studies** examine the specific uses of language within a text and can include regional dialect, novel use of terminology, the development of language over time, etc.
- **Marxist studies** examine the way historical and economic factors operate in the production and distribution of texts, or in the representation of social and economic relationships of people in texts.
- **Post-structuralist studies** make claims about instabilities within a text – particularly at how its binary structures, such as male-female, black-white, East-West, and living-dead, start to break down or take on one another's features.
- **Psychological studies** look at a text, its author, or the society in which it was produced in terms of psychological features and processes. These features and processes might include identity formation, healthy or unhealthy qualities of mind, dreams and symptoms, etc.
- **Queer studies** challenges heteronormativity in texts and focuses on sexual identity and desire.

Before you write your research paper (or project), you should do some broad research into the theory you are assigned (or that you choose) as well as some deeper research into the specific concept(s) you will be using from that theory. Broad research can include wikipedia entries or the various “For Beginners” or “Introducing” books, such as *Lacan for Beginners* by Philip Hill, (1999) or *Introducing Lacan* by Darian Leader and Judy Groves (1995). Once you have a good general understanding of a theory, then dive into a work written by the theorist. Most literary critics combine two or more theories. They choose their theories based on their interests, their audience, or their research question. Consult with your professor or a more experienced researcher about which theory or theories to use for your research.

Each theory entails particular research questions and methods. For instance, Ecological theory, also called [Ecocriticism](#), entails questions about the representation

of human culture and nature. How or where does a text draw a line between the two? What assumptions does a text make about culture and nature? What consequences do these assumptions produce in terms of moving us towards ecological destruction or well-being? Ecological theory also entails particular research methods such as close readings of literary texts, studies of the environment, and historical research into ideas about nature and culture and how they have changed over time.

Note: in literary research, a theory is not an “unproven fact.” Rather, it is an explanation of how facts relate to one another. For instance, Marxism provides a theory of various values (such as labor value, sign value, exchange value, use value, and so on). These theories explain certain facts, like why a necklace made with diamonds and an identical-looking necklace made with costume jewels can have the same sign-value (in other words, the same power to impress) but different exchange values (one being much more expensive than another). Facts are things we can observe and the reasoned inferences we draw from those observations (i.e. that a human being is a mammal) while theories explain “the bigger picture” (like how humans evolved from other mammals).

Methodologies

Methodologies (not to be confused with methods – more about that later) are sets of assumptions and behaviors that researchers within a theoretical paradigm use in their research.

Example: Psychological Methodologies

A psychological study of a literary work will start with a set of assumptions:

1. Most literary works, like a person’s unconscious, cannot speak directly to the reader but does so indirectly through images, metaphors, and intimations.
2. Most literary works conceal as much as they reveal.
3. Identity, whether that of a fictional character, a narrator, an author, or a reader, is a construction – an unstable linguistic effect.

The goal of a psychoanalytic reading is to describe the processes of censorship at work in a literary work and to reveal or expose the hidden unconscious of the text. To do so involves

1. Seeing details of behavior and thoughts as symptoms of deeper desires and fears.
2. Breaking up the “secondary revision” of the text – its apparent coherence – to deal with its fragmented and networked elements.
3. Reasoning from manifest surfaces (behaviors and thoughts) to latent depths (deeper desires and fears)
4. Revealing the reasoning (connecting the manifest to the latent): the ways a text uses condensation (metaphor) and displacement (metonymy), and works to both reveal and hide the latent content.
5. Characterizing the text as neurotic, paranoid, perverse, etc., much as a doctor might characterize a person undergoing psychoanalysis.

Critics and theorists expand on each other’s work by extrapolating from one context to another. For instance, Freud extrapolated his most famous theory – the Oedipus Complex – from a work of literature (Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*), which he developed for use within the medical establishment to diagnose and treat patients. Critics extrapolated from Freud’s work with real people to understand the psychology of fictional characters. In your own work as a literary scholar, you can extrapolate by applying a theory to a new context. A great deal of creative or original work in the field of literary studies comes from transferring knowledge from one domain (like psychology) to another (like literature).

Criticism

Criticism is a specific treatment of a literary work. It often uses theory to make a case about the work. For example, we might start a work of literary criticism by selecting a short story by William Faulkner and considering it in terms of one of the concepts above such as abject, alienation, allegory, aporia, apparatus, aspectuality, assemblage, ATH, attraction and repulsion, attunement, or aura. Any of these ideas could make for a valuable and interesting approach to Faulkner’s work. Trying to write a paper without such concepts is unlikely to yield valuable and interesting results. Theory concepts give us lots of great material! By using the concepts and terms common to our area of study, you connect your work to the ongoing conver-

sation, making it relevant!

Method

Method is the procedure that researchers use to answer their research question. For instance, a paper investigating Faulkner's use of allegory may involve methods of historical research that reveal how literary authors have understood and used allegory over time. The project could also involve methods of close reading of a literary text to notice details other critics have missed. We will address both method and close reading more fully in the following pages.

Exercises

1. What theory or theories will you be using for your paper? Why did you make this theory selection over other theories? If you haven't made a selection yet, which theories are you considering?
2. What specific concepts from the theory/theories are you most interested in exploring in relation to the chosen literary work?
3. What is your plan for researching your theory and its major concepts?
4. What was the most important lesson you learned from this module? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussion area and find the Theory Guides the Inquiry Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Research Methods

This page discusses the following topics:

- [Research Methods](#)
- [Research Goals](#)
- [Research Method Types](#)

Research Methods

Before discussing *research methods*, we need to distinguish them from *methodologies* and *research skills*. Methodologies, linked to literary theories, are a set of reading practices and general assumptions about texts. Researchers using [Marxist literary criticism](#) will adopt methodologies that look to material forces like labor, ownership, and technology to understand literature and its relationship to the world. They will also seek to understand authors not as inspired geniuses but as people whose lives and work are shaped by social forces. Research skills are about how you handle materials such as library search engines, citation management programs, special collections materials, and so on.

Research *methods* are about where and how you get answers to your research questions. Are you conducting interviews? Visiting archives? Doing close readings? Reviewing scholarship? You will need to choose which methods are most appropriate to use in your research and you need to gain some knowledge about how to use these methods. In other words, you need to do some research into research methods!

Your choice of research method depends on the kind of questions you are asking. For example, if you want to understand how an author progressed through several drafts to arrive at a final manuscript, you may need to do archival research. If you want to understand why a particular literary work became a bestseller, you may need to do audience research. If you want to know why a contemporary author wrote a particular work, you may need to do interviews. Usually literary research

involves a combination of methods such as [archival research](#), [discourse analysis](#), and [qualitative research](#) methods.

Literary research methods tend to differ from research methods in the hard sciences (such as physics and chemistry). Science research must present results that are reproducible, while literary research rarely does (though it must still present evidence for its claims). Literary research often deals with questions of meaning, social conventions, representations of lived experience, and aesthetic effects; these are questions that reward dialogue and different perspectives rather than one great experiment that settles the issue. In literary research, we might get many valuable answers even though they are quite different from one another. Also in literary research, we usually have some room to speculate about answers, but our claims have to be plausible (believable) and our argument comprehensive (meaning we don't overlook evidence that would alter our argument significantly if it were known).

Research Goals

Wendy Belcher, in *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks*, identifies two main approaches to understanding literary works: looking at a text by itself (associated with [New Criticism](#)) and looking at texts as they connect to society (associated with [Cultural Studies](#)). The goal of New Criticism is to bring the reader further into the text. The goal of Cultural Studies is to bring the reader into the network of discourses that surround and pass through the text. Other approaches, such as Eco-criticism, relate literary texts to the Sciences (as well as to the Humanities).

The New Critics, starting in the 1940s, focused on meaning within the text itself, using a method they called "[close reading](#)." The text itself becomes evidence for a particular reading. Using this approach, you should summarize the literary work briefly and quote particularly meaningful passages, being sure to introduce quotes and then interpret them (never let them stand alone). Make connections within the work; ask "why" and "how" the various parts of the text relate to each other.

Cultural Studies critics see all texts as connected to society; the critic therefore has to connect a text to at least one political or social issue. How and why does the text

reproduce particular knowledge systems (known as discourses) and how do these knowledge systems relate to issues of power within the society? Who speaks and when? Answering these questions helps your reader understand the text in context. Cultural contexts can include the treatment of gender (Feminist, Queer), class (Marxist), nationality, race, religion, or any other area of human society.

Other approaches, such as [psychoanalytic literary criticism](#), look at literary texts to better understand human psychology. A psychoanalytic reading can focus on a character, the author, the reader, or on society in general. [Ecocriticism](#) look at human understandings of nature in literary texts.

Research Method Types

We select our research methods based on the kinds of things we want to know. For example, we may be studying the relationship between literature and society, between author and text, or the status of a work in the literary canon. We may want to know about a work's form, genre, or thematics. We may want to know about the audience's reading and reception, or about methods for teaching literature in schools.

Psychometricians try to measure *it*.
Experimentalists try to control *it*.
Interviewers ask questions about *it*.
Observers watch *it*.
Participant observers do *it*.
Statisticians count *it*.
Evaluators value *it*.
Qualitative inquirers find meaning in *it*.¹

Below are a few research methods and their descriptions. You may need to consult with your instructor about which ones are most appropriate for your project. The

1. Patton, Michael Quinn. "Qualitative research and evaluation methods. Thousand Oaks." Cal.: Sage Publications 4 (2002), 1.

first list covers methods most students use in their work. The second list covers methods more commonly used by advanced researchers. Even if you will not be using methods from this second list in your research project, you may read about these research methods in the scholarship you find.

Most commonly used undergraduate research methods:

1. **Scholarship Methods:** Studies the body of scholarship written about a particular author, literary work, historical period, literary movement, genre, theme, theory, or method.
2. **Textual Analysis Methods:** Used for close readings of literary texts, these methods also rely on literary theory and background information to support the reading.
3. **Biographical Methods:** Used to study the life of the author to better understand their work and times, these methods involve reading biographies and autobiographies about the author, and may also include research into private papers, correspondence, and interviews.
4. **Discourse Analysis Methods:** Studies language patterns to reveal ideology and social relations of power. This research involves the study of institutions, social groups, and social movements to understand how people in various settings use language to represent the world to themselves and others. Literary works may present complex mixtures of discourses which the characters (and readers) have to navigate.
5. **Creative Writing Methods:** A literary re-working of another literary text, creative writing research is used to better understand a literary work by investigating its language, formal structures, composition methods, themes, and so on. For instance, a creative research project may retell a story from a minor character's perspective to reveal an alternative reading of events. To qualify as research, a creative research project is usually combined with a piece of theoretical writing that explains and justifies the work.

Methods used more often by advanced researchers:

1. **Archival Methods:** Usually involves trips to special collections where original papers are kept. In these archives are many unpublished materials such as diaries, letters, photographs, ledgers, and so on. These materials can offer us

invaluable insight into the life of an author, the development of a literary work, or the society in which the author lived.

2. **Computational Methods:** Used for statistical analysis of texts such as studies of the popularity and meaning of particular words in literature over time.
3. **Ethnographic Methods:** Studies groups of people and their interactions with literary works, for instance in educational institutions, in reading groups (such as book clubs), and in fan networks. This approach may involve interviews and visits to places (including online communities) where people interact with literary works. Note: before you begin such work, you must have [Institutional Review Board \(IRB\)](#) approval “to protect the rights and welfare of human participants involved in research.”
4. **Visual Methods:** Studies the visual qualities of literary works. Some literary works, such as illuminated manuscripts, children’s literature, and graphic novels, present a complex interplay of text and image. Even works without illustrations can be studied for their use of typography, layout, and other visual features.

Regardless of the method(s) you choose, you will need to learn how to apply them to your work and how to carry them out successfully. For example, you should know that many archives do not allow you to bring pens (you can use pencils) and you may not be allowed to bring bags into the archives. You will need to keep a record of which documents you consult and their location (box number, etc.) in the archives. If you are unsure how to use a particular method, please consult a book about it.²

2. A few sources on research methods:

- *Introduction to Research Methods: A Practical Guide for Anyone Undertaking a Research Project* by Catherine, Dr. Dawson
- *Practical Research Methods: A User-Friendly Guide to Mastering Research Techniques and Projects* by Catherine Dawson
- *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* by John W. Creswell Cheryl N. Poth
- *Qualitative Research Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice* by Michael Quinn Patton
- *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* by John W. Creswell J. David Creswell
- *Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners* by Ranjit Kumar
- *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques* by C.R. Kothari

Also, ask for the advice of trained researchers such as your instructor or a research librarian.

Exercises

1. What research method(s) will you be using for your paper? Why did you make this method selection over other methods? If you haven't made a selection yet, which methods are you considering?
2. What specific methodological approaches are you most interested in exploring in relation to the chosen literary work?
3. What is your plan for researching your method(s) and its major approaches?
4. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussions area and find the Research Methods Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Evidence

Research methods are all about gathering evidence. This [evidence](#), composed of facts and the reasoning that connects them, aims to convince your audience to accept your conclusions about the literary work. The most important piece of evidence you need to discuss is the literary work itself, which is a “fact” that you and your audience can examine together. Research means finding additional facts about the literary work and tying them together with reasoning to reach a significant and convincing conclusion.

Literature often presents us with factual difficulties. Sometimes authors revised their works and multiple versions exist. [William Blake](#) printed his own works and often changed illustrations and words between each printing. If we are reading a translated work, there may be more than one translation. In other words, we first need to identify which literary “object” we are studying. Electronic databases, such as the [William Blake Archive](#), provide scholars with multiple versions of literary works, as well as plenty of reference sources. They are great places to begin a study!

The kind of evidence we need is directly related to the kind of claim we are making. If we want to claim that a literary work has seen a resurgence of public interest, we will look for historical evidence and quantitative evidence (statistics) to show that sales of the work (or library checkouts, etc.) have increased. We may also seek qualitative evidence (such as interviews with booksellers and readers) to report on their impressions. We may look to see if there has been an increase in the number and kinds of adaptations. One example of such a work is Denis Perry’s and Carl Sederholm’s edited volume, *Adapting Poe: Re-imaginings in Popular Culture* (Spring 2012). If we are claiming that a literary work has a special relationship to a geographic region, we will look for textual evidence, geographic evidence, and historical evidence. See for example, Tom Conley’s *The Self-Made Map* (University of Minnesota Press 1996), which argues for the significance of geographic regions of France in Miguel de Montaigne’s *Essays*.

Types of Evidence

Your choice of problem, theory, methodology, and method impact the kinds of evidence you will be seeking. Wendy Belcher identifies the following types:

1. **Qualitative Evidence:** Data on human behavior and collected through direct observation, interviews, documents, and basic ethnography (191). The *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2005) is a helpful guide. This area also encompasses audience research. Examples include the journal *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, the edited volume *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Suleiman, Crosman, eds. 1980), and *Media and Print Cultural Consumption in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Rooney and Gasperini, eds. 2016).
2. **Quantitative Evidence:** Data collected from standardized instruments and statistics, common to education, medicine, sociology, political sciences, psychology, and economics (191). Guides include *Best Practices in Quantitative Methods* (Osbourne 2007) and *Statistics for People Who (Think that They) Hate Statistics* (Salkind 2007).
3. **Historical Evidence:** Data collected from examinations of historical records to uncover the relationship of people to each other and to periods and events, common to all disciplines and collected from archives of primary materials (191). Guides include *Historical Evidence and Argument* (Henige 2006) and *Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace, 2nd Edition* (Mills 2009).
4. **Geographic Evidence:** Data about people's relationship to places and environments in fields such as archaeology (191). Guides include *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography, 5th Edition* (Hay and Cope 2021) and *Creative Methods for Human Geographers* (Benzon, Holton, Wilkinson, eds. 2021).
5. **Textual Evidence:** Data collected from texts about form (genre, plot, etc.), language (diction, rhetoric), purpose (message, function), meaning (symbolism, themes, etc.) and milieu (sources, culture, identity, etc.) (191). Guides include *Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics* (Szondi 1995) and *The Hermeneutic Spiral and Interpretation in Literature and the Visual Arts* (O'Toole 2018).
6. **Artistic Evidence:** Data from images, live performances, etc. used to study physical properties of a work (size, material, form, etc.), purpose (message, function, etc.) meaning (symbolism, etc.), and milieu (sources, culture, etc.) (191). Guides include *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (Pearce 1994) and *Material Culture Studies in America* (Schlereth, ed. 1982).

CHAPTER FIVE: READING AND INTERPRETING LITERARY WORKS

Chapter Five Objectives

This chapter covers the ways that literary scholars read and interpret literary works. Before we can do research about a literary work, we need to have some understanding of the literary text. Literary scholars tend to re-read a text many times: before doing additional research, during research, and during the writing process. A literary text stands as the most valuable “evidence” that a literary scholar presents to readers. In “Reading Literary Works,” we introduce three strategies for reading a literary work, including explication, analysis, and comparison/contrast. Your research project should make use of at least one of each of these reading strategies. In “Interpreting Literary Works,” we introduce two major interpretive strategies: explicatory and symptomatic. You should choose at least one of the interpretation strategies (it’s ok to combine them too).

Learning Objectives

These pages provide practical advice on how to read literary works before beginning your research project. By learning these lessons, you will be able to use the following strategies in your reading of literary works:

- explication
- analysis
- comparison/contrast

Great critics learn to use many reading skills and to show audiences how they read a text. Interpretation requires skills as well and is difficult to master. The two interpretive paradigms you will learn are:

- explicatory, which transforms implicit meaning into explicit meaning
- symptomatic, which suggest a text’s explicit message is betrayed by another message that the text has attempted to disguise

Your research will benefit when you use these strategies before you formulate your research question and thesis statement.

Reading Literary Works

"The most fantastic thing you could film is people reading. I don't see why no one's done it...
The movie you'd make would be a lot more interesting than most of them."

— Jean-Luc Godard

We discuss the following subjects on this page:

- [Reading Literary Works](#)
- [Beginning Your Reading](#)
- [Explication](#)
- [Analysis](#)
- [Comparison and Contrast](#)

Reading Literary Works

Research into literature requires us to put more energy and attention into reading than we normally do for activities such as light reading or reading for enjoyment. Researchers read literary works multiple times using a variety of reading strategies in combination, such as the following:

Reading Strategies

- **Exploratory reading:** or pre-reading, looking for key phrases, words, and headings to get a general sense of what the work is about
- **Skimming:** looking for main ideas, topic sentences and paragraphs, and abstracts
- **Revision:** rereading to test your recollection of the text and to check your understanding
- **Search:** looking for specific information
- **Mastery:** slow, careful reading paying attention to details

- **Critical:** assessing and reviewing ideas within the text, looking for examples of reasoning, irony, satire, sincerity, etc.

A key form of reading in literary studies is *interrogatory*, which means asking questions of the text as you read. It may seem odd to put questions to a written text since, as Socrates once said, it “always gives one unvarying answer.” Yet asking questions of a text makes some sense because reading can be like a dialogue in which the reader brings important things to the interaction. All writing contains “gaps” that require us to fill in what’s missing. Charles Dickens begins his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* with the words, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . .” A reader might ask, “how can something be both the best and the worst when those words mean opposite things?” We then look for additional evidence in the text as well as in our own experiences, to help answer the question. For instance, maybe high school graduation comes to mind as a “best of times, worst of times”; it is a time to celebrate an achievement but also a time when key friendships might come to an end. Graduation can produce a sense of freedom and a sense of terrible uncertainty. We can read Dickens with our understanding of high school graduation in mind, but should also consider that Dickens’ text may be suggesting something quite different. Rereading a text might bring us different answers if we have changed our framework for understanding.

Beginning Your Reading

Your instructor may require a research project about a specific literary work, a body of work by a single author or authors, a comparative study of multiple literary works, or may leave the choice to you. To complete a successful literary research project, you will need to know how to read literature the way a researcher does. Reading for pleasure is good, but is not sufficient (because literary research goes beyond stating that you enjoyed – or didn’t enjoy – a text). Your goal is to understand a text. Understanding a text does not require you to like the text, agree with the text, or identify with the text. Some literary works, like Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s “Notes from

Underground,” may be quite unpleasant to read. But we need to understand what a text is, what it does, and what it is telling us. To answer these questions, you should note the following

Features of Literary Works

- Genre (poem, short story, drama, novel, creative nonfiction, comic, [electronic literature](#), etc.)
- Major themes
- Primary structure (narrative, metaphor, argument, etc.)
- Cultural context (nationality, period, culture, etc.)
- Point of view (first person, second person, third person, omniscient)
- Setting(s)
- Primary characters
- Intended audience (children, adults, students, nobility, etc.)
- Style (playful, challenging, blunt, academic)
- Possible functions (to entertain, educate, persuade, criticize, etc.)

In literary studies, we no longer grant the author the final word over what a piece of literature is or means or does because authors may not be fully aware of their own assumptions, blind spots, cultural conditioning, and so on. Also, authors, like everyone else, may forget, distort, omit, and misrepresent their own work. Their comments on their work are important though and we shouldn’t ignore them. Our goal as literary researchers is to capture and represent the intentions of a text, whether the author is aware of them or not. For instance, JK Rowling has disavowed transgendered people, but many readers of the *Harry Potter* series find that the text affirms transgender identities.

Explication

Literary critics practice various kinds of reading but one of the most important is explication. Explication involves selecting a passage of the text for a “close reading,” examining the details and nuances to see how they fit together and achieve their effects. Generally you will do a close reading on only a portion of a text, but it is pos-

sible to do a close reading of an entire text, especially if it is very brief. In general, you should do an explication of at least one passage from a literary text in your research project.

Below is a close reading of a short poem. Poetry has many things going on at once: metaphor, theme, subject, form, elements, means, images, diction, syntax, alliteration and assonance, rhyme, meter, tone, genre, paradox, etc. Poetry also makes use of narrative and argument. All of these elements are important, but usually the metaphorical structure of poetry is critically important. Poetic metaphor is not as much about people and/or things as it is about the *relationships* between people and/or things. We make sense of relationships by analogy to other relationships.

Let's explicate a poem from the 9th century. We will see how complicated the central metaphor is.

Doesn't he realize

Doesn't he realize
that I am not
like the swaying kelp
in the surf,
where the seaweed gatherer
can come as often as he wants.

— Ono no Komachi, Translated from Japanese by Rexroth and I. Atsumi

How to make sense of it? We first need to fill in the metaphorical algebra: A is to B as C is to D, or *He* (A) is to *Me* (B) as the *Seaweed Gatherer* (C) is to the *Swaying Kelp* (D). To understand the relationship between the speaker and the “he” of the poem, we first have to figure out the relationship of the seaweed gatherer to the swaying kelp. The most obvious thing about this relationship is that swaying kelp is *passive* while the seaweed gatherer is *active*. The kelp (which is a form of seaweed commonly used in Japanese cuisine) can't fight back or escape. It just sways in the surf and the seaweed gatherer can take it if he likes. The speaker seems to be saying that she is passive while he is active. Presumably, this means he can gather

what he wants from her (which could be love, money, or sex) without her having any means to stop him.

People and seaweed differ in many other ways that are either less relevant or not relevant here. Seaweed is a plant while people are animals. People have legs and seaweed does not. There are probably millions of differences between people and seaweed, and many similarities too. For the sake of our reading of the poem, however, these similarities and differences are less relevant than the qualities *active* and *passive*.

But we have to change our view of the relationship between the man and the woman in the poem when we attend to the word “not.” The speaker says she is *not* like the swaying kelp. Her negation of the metaphor using the word “not” means we have to switch her position from *passive* to *active*, since being able to say no would make her different from the swaying kelp. In other words, she seems to be saying that she *can* stop him from taking what he wants from her.

But the structure of the poem makes us change our reading of the metaphor again. The speaker of the poem does not address the man directly (with “Don’t you realize . . .”), but addresses a third person. If she were truly able or willing to say “no” – to be active – she would tell the man directly, “I am not like the swaying kelp.” By asking, “doesn’t he realize?” she implies that he doesn’t realize. In the man’s mind, he is the seaweed gatherer and she is the swaying kelp and she won’t do anything to change the relationship. She will only complain to a third person, who might be herself, a friend, or you, the reader, about how she *wishes* she were active.

The poem is relatable because many people have been through times when they wish they could say “no” but don’t. We rehearse what we might say, knowing that we likely won’t say it to the right person at the right time. “Doesn’t he realize” does not authorize complacency. Rather, it draws our attention to the ways in which we try to convince ourselves we are standing up for ourselves without actually doing so.

Analysis

Reading analytically means looking at the parts of a literary work and seeing how they relate to the whole. “Parts” can refer to different characters, plot elements, themes, or other features of a literary text. For instance, we might read “Sonny’s Blues” in terms of the relationship between language and music as different forms of communication. The narrator, Sonny’s brother, tries to communicate with Sonny through language but repeatedly fails. Though he is extremely articulate, he can’t reach his brother. Only at the end does he realize that communication goes two ways and he has not really listened to his brother. His brother communicates through music more than through language. Here is the second-to-last paragraph in which the narrator finally hears and understands his brother through his music.

Excerpt from James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues”

Then they all gathered around Sonny and Sonny played. Every now and again one of them seemed to say, amen. Sonny’s fingers filled the air with life, his life. But that life contained so many others. And Sonny went all the way back, he really began with the spare, flat statement of the opening phrase of the song. Then he began to make it his. It was very beautiful because it wasn’t hurried and it was no longer a lament. I seemed to hear with what burning he had made it his, with what burning we had yet to make it ours, how we could cease lamenting. Freedom lurked around us and I understood, at last, that he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. Yet, there was no battle in his face now. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth. He had made it his: that long line, of which we knew only Mama and Daddy. And he was giving it back, as every thing must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever. I saw my mother’s face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones of the road she had walked on must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father’s brother died. And it brought something else back to me, and carried me past it, I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel’s tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky.

The narrator comes to a better understanding of his brother – and even himself – through music rather than through language. But something kind of magical happens in this paragraph as well. Paradoxically, the narrator is able to transform Sonny’s music into language and to share it with us, his readers. Thus the text shows

us that the gulf between language and music, just like the gulf between the narrator and his brother, *is* bridgeable.

Your research project should include an analysis of at least two parts of a literary work (characters, plot, themes, etc.) and explain how they relate to the whole.

Comparison and Contrast

Sometimes a literary work comes into better focus when we read it alongside another work. The other work may be by the same author, a contemporary of the author, of a similar genre, from another culture. etc. The point is that we don't really understand a literary work in a vacuum but instead we read it in relation to other works. In your research, you should decide whether it is necessary or valuable to compare and contrast your chosen work with another.

Below is a comparison and contrast between a Biblical parable and a modern parable.

*Jesus's "Sower of Seeds" Parable from
The Gospel of Mark*

Once again he began to teach beside the seashore. And the greatest multitude gathered to hear him, so that he went aboard the ship and was seated out to sea, and all the multitude was on shore facing the sea. He taught them a great deal in parables, and said to them in his discourse: Listen. Behold, a sower went out to sow. And it happened as he sowed that some of the grain fell beside the way, and birds came and ate it. Some fell on stony ground where there was not much soil, and it shot up quickly because there was no depth of soil; and when the sun came up it was parched and because it had no roots it dried away. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and stifled it, and it bore no fruit. But some fell upon the good soil, and it bore fruit, and shot up and increased, and yielded thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. And he said: He who has ears, let him hear. When they were alone, his followers along with the twelve asked him about the parables. He said to them: To you are given the secrets of the Kingdom of God; but to those who are outside all comes through parables, so that they may have sight but not see, and hear but not understand, lest they be converted and forgiven. And he said to them: You did not read this parable? Then how shall you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. And these are the ones beside the way where the word is sown, and as soon as they hear it Satan comes and snatches the word that has been sown among them. And there are some who are as if sown on stony ground, who when they hear the word accept it with joy; and they have no roots in themselves but are men of the moment, and when there comes affliction and persecution, because of the word, they do not stand fast. And others are those who were sown among thorns; these are the ones who hear the word, and concern of the world and the beguilement of riches and desires for other things come upon them and stifle the word,

*Franz Kafka's "Before the Law" parable
from The Trial*

Before the law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country and prays for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance at the moment. The man thinks it over and then asks if he will be allowed in later. "It is possible," says the doorkeeper, "but not at the moment." Since the gate stands open, as usual, and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man stoops to peer through the gateway into the interior. Observing that, the doorkeeper laughs and says: "If you are so drawn to it, just try to go in despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the least of the doorkeepers. From hall to hall there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last. The third doorkeeper is already so terrible that even I cannot bear to look at him." These are difficulties the man from the country has not expected; the Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone, but as he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard, he decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at one side of the door. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be admitted, and wearies the doorkeeper by his importunity. The doorkeeper frequently has little interviews with him, asking him questions about his home and many other things, but the questions are put indifferently, as great lords put them, and always finish with the statement that he cannot be let in yet. The man, who has furnished himself with many things for his journey, sacrifices all he has, however valuable, to bribe the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts everything, but always with the remark: "I am only taking it to keep you from thinking you have omitted anything." During these many years the man fixes his attention almost continuously on the doorkeeper. He forgets the other

and it bears no fruit. And the others are those who were sown upon sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Then he said to them: Surely the lamp is not brought in so as to be set under a basket or under the bed rather than to be set on a stand; for there is nothing hidden except to be shown, nor anything concealed except to be brought to light. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. And he said to them: Consider what you hear. Your measure will be made by the measure by which you measure, and more shall be added for you. When a man has, he shall be given; when one has not, even what he has shall be taken away from him. And he said: The Kingdom of God is as when a man sows his seed in the ground, and sleeps and wakes night and day, and the seed grows and increases without his knowing it; for of itself the earth bears fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain gives its yield, he puts forth the sickle, for the time of harvesting is come. And he said: To what shall we liken the Kingdom of God, and in what parable shall we place it? It is like the seed of mustard, which when it is sown in the ground is smaller than all the seeds on earth, but when it has been sown, it shoots up and becomes greater than all the other greens, and puts forth great branches, so that the birds of the air may nest in its shadow. With many such parables he spoke the word to them, according to what they could comprehend; but he did not talk with them except in parables; but privately with his own disciples he expounded all.

— **Mark 4.11-30, translated by Richmond Lattimore**

doorkeepers, and this first one seems darker or whether his eyes are only deceiving him. Yet in his darkness he is now aware of a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law. Now he has not very long to live. Before he dies, all his experiences in these long years gather themselves in his head to one point, a question he has not yet asked the doorkeeper. He waves him nearer, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend low toward him, for the difference in height between them has altered much to the man's disadvantage. "What do you want to know now?" asks the doorkeeper; "you are insatiable." "Everyone strives to reach the Law," says the man, "so how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance?" The doorkeeper recognizes that the man has reached his end, and, to let his failing senses catch the words, roars in his ear: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."

— **Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir**

Both Jesus' and Kafka's parables are about gateways. Jesus's parable is about the gateway separating foolishness from wisdom. Kafka's parable is about the gateway separating injustice from justice. In *The Trial*, Joseph K. has been accused of a crime, though the details of the supposed crime are never explained. Joseph K. is told that to be accused is also to be condemned (his guilt is already certain), but that he should review his life to understand what he might have done wrong. He seeks access to legal officials to whom he can plead his case. Here a priest, who is an employee of the court, introduces himself to Joseph K. and tells him this parable.

Following the parable, Kafka provides a discussion between Joseph K. and the priest about its proper interpretation, just as Jesus and his disciples discuss the proper interpretation of the “Sower of Seeds” parable.

Each part of Jesus’ parable has a single meaning that links elements of horticulture to spiritual teachings. By contrast, in Kafka’s parable, the priest and Joseph K. discuss numerous possible interpretations of the parable. Unlike Jesus, the priest who presents “Before the Law” did not create the parable and he is not an ultimate authority on its meaning. It’s unclear if there is any ultimate authority on its proper interpretation.

Also by contrast, Jesus’ parable offers a clear way to cross the gateway to wisdom, though it is highly contingent. If a man is given the seed (the divine word) and it lands in fertile soil (a receptive soul) it can grow and he can harvest the fruit (wisdom). Wisdom is contingent because certain people may not want wisdom or may have souls that are not prepared for it or may be in an environment not conducive to it. Jesus even says he doesn’t want everyone to understand his message: “To you are given the secrets of the Kingdom of God; but to those who are outside all comes through parables, so that they may have sight but not see, and hear but not understand, lest they be converted and forgiven.” The Kafka parable also shows us a gateway — to justice — but it is quite unclear whether it can be crossed at all or what justice will be on the other side. It is unclear whether the parable is meant for one person, for some people, or for everyone.

Jesus compares something difficult to understand (how to spread wisdom) to something well-understood (that plants grow from seeds). The complicating factor in Jesus’ parable is that he presents different kinds of people with different kinds of souls to explain why wisdom grows in some but not in others. Kafka’s parable is less straightforward because he is comparing something difficult to understand (access to justice) to something that is strange and only partially known – a guard at a door meant only for one person. We understand the parable as being relevant to Joseph K., who belongs to a category (the accused), but why is he in that category? What is beyond the door? What other choices did the petitioner have?

A major difference between the two parables is that Jesus limits interpretation while Kafka invites us to consider multiple interpretations and to continually speculate about what is unknown (and perhaps even unknowable).

Interpreting Literary Works

We discuss the following subjects on this page:

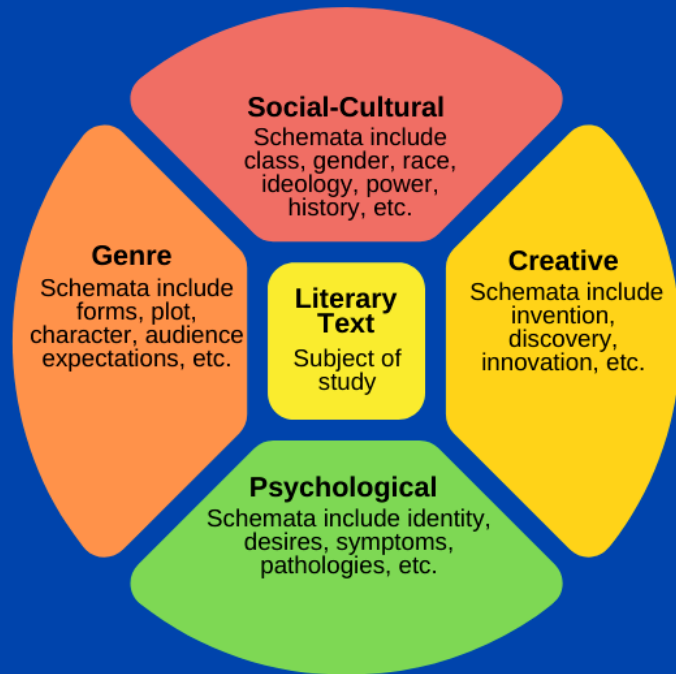
- [Interpretation Introduction](#)
- [How to Interpret Literary Texts Using Schemata](#)
- [Symptomatic and Explicatory Interpretations](#)

Interpretation Introduction

Interpretation is the process of *making meaning* from a text. Literary theorists have different understandings of what interpretation is, what constitutes a “good” interpretation, and whether we should even be interpreting literary texts at all. Frank Kermode, for example, claimed that only insiders are able to interpret stories properly but even they are prone to errors. Susan Sontag argued that we should refrain from interpretation and confront the literary and artistic work “as is” so we can experience it on its own terms. Umberto Eco stated that literature allows for a range of interpretations but some are better than others. Their disagreements center on the freedom of the reader. Should the reader be able to make any meaning whatsoever from a text? Does the text resist interpretation and insist on being read on its own terms? What constrains the reader’s freedom to interpret? Do constraints arise from the author, from within the text itself, from within the reader, or from within the culture? (And whose culture, we might ask, should determine the proper interpretation: the reader’s or the author’s?)

Discourse Circle

We can perceive a single text from multiple perspectives, applying various discursive schemata, or patterns of meaning. Usually, these schemata are associated with literary theories. Scholars often combine several of them when researching a literary text.



How to Interpret Literary Texts Using Schemata

There are numerous schools of interpretation, each with their own interpretive schema. A schema is a broad theoretical framework for understanding the world. We discussed a variety of these theoretical frameworks in the previous unit. To oversimplify: psychoanalysis uses the schema of personal development; Marxism uses the schema of class struggle; feminism uses the schema of gender inequality; Christianity uses the schema of sin and redemption; etc.

Producing an Interpretation

1. Notice significant details in the literary text
2. Find a pattern in those details
3. Map the pattern found in the literary text to an interpretive schema
4. Claim that X in the literary text is really Y from the schema

Notice that interpretation moves from the specific to the general, from the details of the literary work into more conceptual terms. Most critics only use some, not all, of the details from a literary work in the interpretation. If you disagree with a critic, you can pose a contrary interpretation by claiming that the critic overlooked significant details from the literary work, formed a misleading pattern, and mapped those details to the wrong schema. Finally, you offer your own interpretation, following the steps outlined above. Many critics combine interpretive schemas. Also, it is acceptable to be suspicious of schema and of overarching narratives, especially ones that supposedly “explain everything.” We can use schema and include a caveat that while they are useful we need not grant them gospel truth.

Symptomatic and Explicatory Interpretations

David Bordwell, in his book *Making Meaning* (which is primarily about film interpretation but works quite well for understanding literary interpretation), discusses two major interpretive traditions: *explicatory* and *symptomatic*. A *symptomatic* reading is one in which the critic treats the text with suspicion, as though it disguises its true intentions. Your goal, using this method, is to get the text to “confess” its meaning by pointing to “symptoms” in the text. Freud stated, “A symptom is a sign of, and a substitute for, an instinctual satisfaction which has remained in abeyance; it is a consequence of the process of repression” (“Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety” 20.91). The symptomatic critic is looking for signs that betray the real intention of the text or the author, just as Freud seized on forgotten names or slips of the tongue as symptoms that more accurately revealed the patient’s state of mind than did their explicit statements. In a symptomatic reading, a reader might argue that a text that seems anti-racist hides a racist intent or effect.

An *explicatory* reading is one in which the critic turns implied meaning into explicit meaning. An explicatory reading does not treat the literary text with suspicion. For instance, you might find a text that seems anti-racist, and your interpretation explains how it is, in fact, anti-racist.

Bordwell argues that critics often switch the way they read depending on the literary work. Some literary works – ones that critics believe are ideologically abusive –

are read symptomatically, while other works – those critics believe are ideologically healthy – are read using explicatory methods.

Bordwell presents the following passage about *explicatory criticism*:

On a summer day, a suburban father looks out at the family lawn and says to his teen-aged son: "The grass is so tall I can hardly see the cat walking through it." The son construes this to mean: "Mow the lawn." This is an *implicit* meaning. In a similar way, the interpreter of a film may take referential or explicit meaning as only the point of departure for inferences about implicit meanings. That is, she or he *explicates* the film, just as the son might turn to his pal and explain, "That means Dad wants me to mow the lawn." Explicatory criticism rests upon the belief that the principal goal of critical activity is to ascribe implicit meanings to films. (Making 43)

The flip side of this paradigm is that critics tend to perform symptomatic criticisms on texts they consider ideologically suspect. Bordwell explains *symptomatic criticism* in this passage:

On a summer day, a father looks out at the family lawn and says to his teen-aged son: "The grass is so tall I can hardly see the cat walking through it." The son slopes off to mow the lawn, but the interchange has been witnessed by a team of live-in social scientists, and they interpret the father's remarks in various ways. One sees it as typical of an American household's rituals of power and negotiation. Another observer construes the remark as revealing a characteristic bourgeois concern for appearances and a pride in private property. Yet another, perhaps having had some training in the humanities, insists that the father envies the son's sexual proficiency and that the feline image constitutes a fantasy that unwittingly symbolizes (a) the father's identification with a predator; (b) his desire for liberation from his stifling life; his fears of castration (the cat in question has been neutered); or (d) all of the above. [...] Now if these observers were to propose their interpretations to the father, he might deny them with great vehemence, but this would not persuade the social scientists to repudiate their conclusions. They would reply that the meanings they ascribed to the remark were involuntary, concealed by a referential meaning (a report on the height of the grass) and an implicit meaning (the order to mow the lawn). The social scientists have constructed a set of *symptomatic* meanings, and these cannot be demolished by the father's protest. Whether the sources of meaning are intrapsychic or broadly cultural, they lie outside the conscious control of the

individual who produces the utterance. We are now practicing a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a scholarly debunking, a strategy that sees apparently innocent interactions as masking unflattering impulses. (Making 71–72)

Critics employing the symptomatic approach look for “incompatibility between the film’s explicit moral and what emerges as a cultural symptom” (75). In other words, the symptomatic approach looks for instances that indicate a text’s explicit message hides a less flattering message. Such symptomatic readings warn people not to be fooled by appearances; the true, yet disguised, intentions of a text — its “repressed meanings” — are apparent if you know how to look for them. Explicatory criticism, by contrast, urges the audience not to miss the text’s implied messages.

Exercises

1. Practice your reading skills on one or both of the poems below using explication, analysis, or comparison/contrast:

Word

The word bites like a fish.
Shall I throw it back free
Arrowing to that sea
Where thoughts lash tail and fin?
Or shall I pull it in
To rhyme upon a dish?
—Stephen Spender

Pitcher

His art is eccentricity, his aim
How not to hit the mark he seems to aim at,
His passion how to avoid the obvious,
His technique how to vary the avoidance.
The others throw to be comprehended. He
Throws to be a moment misunderstood.
Yet not too much. Not errant, arrant, wild,
But every seeming aberration willed.
Not to, yet still, still to communicate
Making the batter understand too late.
—Robert Francis

2. Do an interpretation of one or both of the poems above, using either an explicatory or sympto-

matic approach.

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussions area and find the Interpreting Literary Works Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

CHAPTER SIX: REVIEWING THE SECONDARY LITERATURE / TYPES OF LITERATURE REVIEWS / READING LIKE A RESEARCHER

Chapter Six Objectives

This chapter deals with what researchers mean by a literature review, and discusses the purpose and the scope of your review. Primary literature is a work of literature or a report by someone with first-hand knowledge (such as an author). Secondary literature is any text that discusses the primary text. Secondary literature includes scholarly analyses, interpretations, criticisms, and other forms of commentary. Your research paper will include both primary and secondary sources. In *Reviewing the Secondary Literature*, we include a video about how to avoid common literature review pitfalls as well as understanding the “intellectual heritage” of your topic or problem. The next module is a review of the many different types of literature reviews with an example of each. These should provide some insight into how to organize your findings and structure your study.

Finally, *Reading Like a Researcher* is an important section designed to demystify scholarly articles and books and to make your literature review more efficient. We focus on the concepts of thinking while reading, strategic skimming, active reading along with some valuable tips for note-taking.

Learning Objectives

The key takeaway from this chapter is to understand all that goes into a literature review and why they're so important. This understanding is essential both for establishing the scope of your review and structuring your study. By reading this chapter and responding to the related discussion prompts, you will learn

- To understand the elements into a literature review and their relevance.
- To develop skills for reading strategic and efficiently like a researcher while you embark on your own review.
- To identify current trends, niches, research gaps, and other opportunities to join the scholarly conversation and to add your unique perspective.

Reviewing the Secondary Literature

Note: not all research papers contain literature reviews in their finished or published form. Check your assignment and guidelines to see if one is required. Even if a literature review is not required, you still need to read the available literature on your topic so you can join the scholarly conversation.

Topics discussed on this page include:

- [The Literature Review](#)
- [What Do We Mean by Literature?](#)
- [What is the Purpose of the Review?](#)
- [What is the Scope of the Review?](#)

The Literature Review

Writing a literary studies research paper involves time and effort, with much of it going towards the development of a *literature review*. A literature review might fill several pages of your research paper and usually appears soon after an introduction and before you present your analysis. A literature review provides your audience with an overview of the available research about your area(s) of study, including the literary work, your theory, and methodology. The literature review demonstrates how these scholarly discussions have changed over time and it allows you to position your research in relation to research that has come before yours. Your aim is to narrate the discussion up to this point. Depending on the nature of the assignment, you may also include your critical commentary on prior research, noting among this material the weaker and stronger arguments, breakthroughs and dead ends, blind spots and opportunities, the invention of key terms and methods, mistakes as well as misreadings, and so on.

Once you have gathered the research materials you need for your literature review,

you have yet another task in front of you: conducting an analysis on said research for your original contribution, which is the part where you discover and bring something new to the conversation. As the saying goes, “we are standing on the shoulders of giants.” Your job is to show a portrait to your audience of these giants and to show how your work relates to it.

Some beginning researchers try to tear down the work of other researchers in an effort to make their own work look good by comparison. It rarely works. First, it tends to make your audience justly skeptical of your claims. Second, it ignores the fact that even the mistakes, blind spots, and failures of other researchers contribute something to our knowledge. Albert Einstein didn't trash Sir Isaac Newton by saying his theory of space was wrong and terrible and that his own theory was great by comparison. He built upon Newton's work, showing how it could be improved. If, however, a researcher willfully set out to deceive others, then their work does not deserve such deference.

Before you begin work on your literature review, let's discuss what we mean by “literature,” understand the purpose and scope of the review, establish criteria for selecting, organizing, and interpreting your findings, and, finally, discuss how to connect your findings to your research question.

What Do We Mean by Literature?

When we use the word “literature” in the phrase “literature review,” we are not talking about literary writing such as novels, poems, and plays, but about scholarly research. Our objective is to tell the story of research up to the point when you add your own contribution. You should use this time to think about what types of information and resources you will need to complete your project. In the case of literary studies, we often start with peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly monographs (books) that can be accessed through the library catalog and subject databases. These are both essential resources, but you may need more.

For Jada's research project about James Baldwin's ‘Sonny's Blues,’ we might also think about exploring newspapers and primary source collections related to civil rights, African American studies, and social activism. Other topics might require different types of media, data sets, case studies, etc.

More about searching for these sources will be discussed in the library resources portion. In the meantime, let's break down the literature review a little further.

What is the Purpose of the Review?

The purpose of the literature review involves more than gathering citations. It is a qualitative process through which you will discover what is already known about your topic, and identify the key authorities, methods, and theoretical foundations so you can begin to position your contributions within the scholarly conversation.

Further, the literature review sharpens the focus of your research and demonstrates your knowledge and understanding of the scholarly conversation around your topic, which in turn helps establish your credibility as a researcher.

What is the Scope of the Review?

Defining the scope of your review will also help you establish criteria to determine the relevance of the sources you are finding. At this stage, you are not reading in-depth; you are taking snapshots of what has been published, identifying major concepts, theories, methodologies, and methods while identifying connections, tensions, and contradictions within what Michael Patton calls the “intellectual heritage” of your topic or problem.

This work involves building on the knowledge of others and understanding what methods, measures, and models we have inherited from previous researchers in our field.

For more about Dr. Patton's thoughts on the literature review, watch this short video:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=114#oembed-1>

Video provided courtesy of the Center for Quality Research (CQR)

Before we take a look at types of reviews, here are some key Dos and Don'ts:

Key Takeaways

Do

- Provide your audience with at least an overview of the available research on your area(s) of study, including the literary work, theory, methodology, and method (if the assignment permits)
- Provide your critical commentary on the materials (if the assignment permits)
- Build on the research found in other scholarship

Don't

- Skip the literature review
- Review only materials about the literary work but not about theory, methodology, and method
- Present previous research as though it is all equally good or useful
- Aim to tear down the research of other scholars

Types of Literature Reviews

The previous page provided an introduction to literature reviews and guidelines for determining the scope and purpose of your review. Next, we'll take a look at the different types of literature reviews and why a researcher might select one type over another. This page will cover:

- [Strategies for Getting Started](#)
- [Types of Literature Reviews](#)
- [Composition Guidelines](#)
- [How to Locate Reviews by Discipline](#)

Strategies for Getting Started

A literature review helps your reader understand the relationship of your research to the scholarly work of others. Not all research projects in the humanities contain literature reviews, but many do.

In addition to establishing the scope of your review, you will also need to decide how to organize your findings. We suggest you begin by making an *annotated list of sources*, then *synthesize* your research, then determine which type of *literature review* works best for your project. To help you gather annotated materials in one place, we provide [a matrix tool](#) that helps you organize and synthesize your research.

We also provide an example of an [annotated list of sources](#) created by UCF student Dolores Batten that explains how her readings relate to her research project, which is to develop methods for improving student writing.

Factors to Consider When Developing Your Literature Review

- **Establish Criteria:** We discussed the importance of defining the purpose and scope of your review on the previous page, but it's worth reviewing here as well. This step will help you establish important criteria and focus your searching. For example, how many sources will you need? What types of sources (primary, secondary, statistics, media)? Is currency important? Do you know who the prominent authors or theorists are in your subject area? Take some time to map out these or other important factors before you begin searching journals and databases.
- **Consider Your Audience:** Unlike a work cited page or an annotated bibliography, both of which are lists of sources, a literature review is essayistic and can be considered a precursor to your final paper. therefore, it should be written in your own voice and it should be geared toward a specific audience. Considering audience during this early stage will help focus your final paper as well.
- **Find Models:** We'll discuss the different types of literature reviews and how to locate examples in the section below. However, even if you're undecided about what type of review will work best for you, you may want to review some examples to get a sense of what they look like before you begin your own.

Types of Reviews

Maria J. Grant and Andrew Booth's "A Typology of Reviews" identifies 14 distinct types of literature reviews. Further, the UCLA library created a chart of that article for easy comparison of those 14 types of reviews. This section provides a brief summary of the most common of those reviews. For a more complete analysis, please see [the full article](#) and [the chart](#).

Types of Reviews

- **Traditional or narrative reviews:** This approach will generate a comprehensive, critical analysis of the published research on your topic. However, rather than merely compiling as many sources as possible, use this approach to establish a theoretical framework for your paper,

establish trends, and identify gaps in the research. This process should bring your research question into clearer focus and help define a thesis that you will argue in your paper. This is perhaps the most common and general type of lit review. The examples listed below are all designed to serve a more specific purpose.

- **Argumentative:** The purpose of an argumentative literature review is to select sources for the purpose of supporting or refuting a specific claim. While this type of review can help the author make a strong case for or against an issue, they can also be prone to claims of bias.
- **Chronological:** A chronological review is used when the author wants to demonstrate the progression of how a theory, methodology, or issue has progressed over time. This method is most effective when there is a clear chronological path to the research about a specific historical event or trend as opposed to a more recursive theoretical concept.
- **By trend:** This is similar to the chronological approach except it focuses on clearly-defined trends rather than date ranges. This would be most appropriate if you want to illustrate changing perspectives or attitudes about a given issue when specific date ranges are less important than the ebb and flow of the trend.
- **Thematic:** In this type of review, the author will select specific themes that he or she feels are important to understanding a larger topic or concept, then organize the sources around those themes, often based on relevance or importance. The value of this method is that the process of organizing the review by theme is similar to constructing an argument. This can help the author see how resources connect to each other and determine how and why specific sources support their thesis.
- **Theoretical:** The goal of this type of review is to examine how theory has shaped the research on a given topic. It establishes existing theoretical models, their connections, and how extensively they have been developed in the published research. For example, Jada applied critical race theory to her analysis of *Sonny's Blues*, but she might also consider conducting a more comprehensive review of other theoretical frameworks such as feminism, Marxism, or post-modernism. Doing so could provide insight into alternate readings and help her identify theoretical gaps such as unexplored or under-developed approaches to Baldwin's work.
- **Methodological:** The approach focuses on the various methods used by researchers in a specific area rather than an analysis of their findings. In this case, you would create a framework of approaches to data collection related to your topic or research question. This is perhaps more common in education or the social and hard sciences where published research often includes a methods section, but it may be appropriate for the digital humanities as well.
- **Scoping:** The aim of a scoping review is to provide a comprehensive overview or map of the published research or evidence related to a research question. This might be considered a prelude to a systematic review that would take the scoping review one step further toward answering a clearly defined research question. See below for more details.
- **Systematic:** The systematic review is most appropriate when you have a clearly-defined research question and have established criteria for the types of sources you need. In this way, the systematic review is less exploratory and searching than other types of reviews. Rather, it is comprehensive, strategic, and focused on answering a specific research question. For this reason, the systematic review is more common in the health and social sciences than the humanities where comprehensiveness is more important than interpretation.
- **Meta-analysis:** Does your research deal with statistics or large amounts of data? If so, then a

meta-analysis might be best for you. rather than providing a critical review, the meta-analysis will summarize and synthesize the results of numerous studies that involve statistics or data to provide a more comprehensive picture than would be possible from just one study.

Composition Guidelines

When writing your literature review, please follow these pointers:

- Conduct systematic searches
- Use Evidence
- Be Selective
- Use Quotes Sparingly
- Summarize & Synthesize
- Use Caution when Paraphrasing
- Use Your Own Voice

How to Locate Reviews by Discipline

Literature reviews can be published as part of a scholarly article, often after the introduction and sometimes with a header, but they can also be published as a standalone essay. To find examples of what reviews look like in your discipline, choose an appropriate subject database, such as MLA for literary criticism, and conduct a keyword search with the term “Literature review added in quotes:

Lit review_1.PNG

This search yields four results:

literature review_2.PNG

Not only do these examples demonstrate how to structure different types of literature reviews, but some offer insights into trends and directions for future research.

In the next section, we'll take a closer look at some reading strategies to help guide you through this process.

Exercises

1. What types of literature review will you be using for your paper? Why did you make this selection over others? If you haven't made a selection yet, which types are you considering?
2. What specific challenges do you face in following a literature review structure?
3. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussions area and find the Types of Literature Reviews Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Reading Like a Researcher

On this page, we discuss

- [Reading Like a Researcher](#)
- [Taking Notes While Reading](#)
- [Strategic Skimming](#)
- [Active Reading](#)
- [The Anatomy of a Journal Article](#)
- [How to Take Notes on a Book](#)

Reading Like a Researcher

While conducting your literature review, you will encounter many types of scholarly writing. This material is often long and dense and can seem intimidating to young scholars. There is a remedy, however. Reading like a researcher is a skill that demystifies scholarly articles and monographs while making your review more efficient. The key is knowing that reading scholarship is different from other types of reading (like reading literary works). It is an active and strategic process that will help you identify the structure of an academic book or article, an author's thesis, their argument, and the scholarly conversation in which they are engaged. We'll also discuss thinking while reading, the anatomy of a journal article, and strategies for effective note-taking.

Let's begin!

Taking Notes While Reading

As you read, take notes on the following:

Questions to Ask While Reading Scholarly Literature

- What is the subject of the reading? What is it about?
- If it is a research paper or theoretical text, what is the thesis?
 - List at least three main points used to support the thesis
 - What evidence is offered in support of the major argument?
- What is the subtext (the author's purpose)?
- Who is the intended audience?
- How credible is the work?
- What applications can the work have (how might it be used)?
- What is the significance (and implications) of these applications?

Students are strongly encouraged to adopt a notetaking/citation management system. UCF offers students one of the most popular programs, [EndNote](#), at no charge. In a later module, we discuss how to use citation management systems.

Strategic Skimming

Given the length and density of scholarly books and articles, it would be difficult to read them closely during your literature review. At this stage, you're scanning and compiling possible resources for your review. Therefore, strategic skimming is an essential skill. Think of it as getting a bird's-eye view of an article or book chapter and selectively zooming in and out of the sections that are most relevant to you. You may go back to those sections for a closer reading, but, for now, you're using this process to identify possible resources. Keep an index of your readings so you can review them and find key passages later.

Understanding how scholarly monographs and articles are organized will make this process easier and more efficient.

Journal Articles

The Abstract: The abstract is a concise paragraph that is considered the “executive summary” of the article. Here you can identify the author’s purpose, the main problem or research question, their methodology, and key findings.

The Introduction: This section builds on the abstract and is where authors make a real effort to connect to their audience. Introductions vary quite widely, but generally they start broadly and narrow down, they state the author’s aims and the importance of their research, they state the hypothesis or research question, and they include a thesis statement. They may also include what is sometimes referred to as a “forecasting statement,” which helps prepare the reader and guide them through the rest of the paper.

Section Headers: If an article is broken into subsections, explore how those subsections are organized to get a sense of how the authors constructed their argument. These subsections may also generate ideas for how you can narrow and focus your topic. You may find that just one subsection is worth digging into deeper, then note who the author cited in that section to help you establish the theoretical foundation for your project.

Keyword Searching: Effective keywords will not only help you locate high quality articles in our subject databases, they can also help you strategically skim through articles to quickly determine their relevance to your project. This strategy can also be effective if you’ve found a reference to an idea in an abstract or introduction and want to jump to that section to get more info. Skimming is not a replacement for a close reading of an article, book chapter, or book; it’s a method for sifting and establishing relevance during the literature review. Think about the article’s title: why did the author choose it? Does it epitomize the argument? Also, don’t just grab a sentence from a text that agrees with your viewpoint without reviewing the larger context. The sentence you grab may not represent the author’s views at all but may be the author’s presentation of an opposing argument.

The Conclusion: This section can be read in tandem with the introduction. Authors often use the conclusion to restate key points; however, they may also ask unanswered questions and leave clues for future research. Sometimes they state these questions explicitly as if they are expecting others to build on what they’ve started. These questions and clues are points for you to jump into the conversation.

Other: Familiarizing yourself with the norms of your field is part of reading like a researcher.

Depending on the field, journal articles may also include sections such as a literature review, keywords, methodology, results, discussion, and directions for future research. We’ll discuss these points further in the “Anatomy of a Research Article” section below.

Scholarly Monographs (Books)

Preface: This section is the book equivalent of the abstract in which authors address their main argument, thesis, and often provide a brief overview of each chapter. The preface can help guide you to the most relevant sections of the book.

Table of Contents: Not only will this index include a list of chapters; it can also orient you to the theoretical focus and structure of the book. It is useful for understanding that specific text and for providing insight into how you might organize your own study. Much like the subcategories discussed above, there might be something in a single chapter worth further investigation.

Introduction & Conclusions: Just as with journal articles, the introduction builds on the preface by providing a more in-depth discussion of the author's argument, thesis, and their findings. The conclusion (if there is one – not all scholarly books have one) might be a recap of the thesis and the key findings. Consider reading these sections together before you read the body of the text.

Indexes: A variation of the keyword searching discussed above is to skim the index to identify sections of the book that are most relevant to you. This approach is also an effective way to build and refine your list of keywords that you will search for in library subject databases.

Active Reading

You should approach the literature review as an *active reader* who believes that other scholars have something important to say, but also as a skeptic searching for gaps in the conversation or for ways to add constructive context or relevance to the discussion.

In *Scholarship as Conversation*, we discussed how the idea of an intended audience can help frame your argument so that you are contributing to the discourse on your topic and are moving the conversation forward. Likewise, when conducting your literature review, try to determine the intended audience of each article, book chapter, or book and what kind of conversation is taking place. After a while, you should start to see connections within the various works: who is building on whose argument and where do certain scholars agree and disagree? Also, do they point to areas of further research that you can build on?

Think of others' research as a relay, or a kind of loose model, for producing your own research project. Published articles and book chapters, especially in edited volumes, provide insight into how researchers target specific audiences and tailor their arguments to meet their reader's expectations. In your writing, a clear sense of audience awareness will help you establish the proper tone and give your paper a sense of purpose. It can also help establish the scope of your literature review and determine which resources will be most effective in your final presentation.

The Anatomy of a Journal Article

With a little experience, you'll be able to tell a lot about a journal article just by examining its structure or anatomy. Articles in the humanities are usually relatively simple compared to the social sciences and STEM (Science Technology, Engineering, Math). While there may be some variation depending on journal requirements, here is a basic breakdown of the two:

<i>Humanities</i>	<i>Social Sciences/ STEM</i>
Abstract	Abstract
Keywords (sometimes)	Keywords (often)
Introduction	Introduction
Body	Literature review
Conclusion	Methodology
Works cited	Results
	Discussion
	Conclusion
	Works cited

Let's examine an article to see how much information we can glean from the first page alone:



JAMDA

journal homepage: www.jamda.com

Review Article

The Effects of Advance Care Planning Interventions on Nursing Home Residents: A Systematic Review



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A B S T R A C T

Keywords:

Advance Care Planning
advance directive
nursing home
aged care facility

Background: Advance care planning (ACP) encompasses a process by which people may express and record their values and preferences for care and treatment should they lose the capacity to communicate them in the future. We believe the effects that ACP can have on the nursing home population is distinct from others and sought to gain insight into the outcomes of relevant studies on the topic.

Aim: To identify the effects of ACP interventions on nursing home residents.

Design: Systematic review.

Methods: A comprehensive literature search was conducted using the following 4 electronic databases, Embase, Medline, PsychINFO, and CINAHL, with no limits on year or language. Gray literature search of relevant journals was also performed as was reviewing of the reference lists of all included articles. Inclusion criteria were randomized controlled trials, controlled trials, pre/post study design trials and prospective studies examining the effects of ACP on nursing home residents. A detailed narrative synthesis was compiled as the heterogeneous nature of the interventions and results precluded meta-analysis.

Results: The initial search yielded 4654 articles. Thirteen studies fitted inclusion criteria for analysis. The

This article is from a nursing journal. Note how we get the name of the journal with a link to the journal's homepage, the title of the article, the authors with their credentials and affiliations, the abstract, and a list of keywords to index the article and to provide the reader with several search terms. Without reading a word, you should immediately discern from the layout that this is a scientific article published in a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal. Everything here is transparent and that transparency enhances the validity of the journal, the authors, and their study.

As noted above, humanities articles have a more basic structure that often flows from the abstract to the introduction into the body of the text. For example, here's a peer-reviewed article on Milton retrieved from the MLA database:

John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*: Deathly Selfhood

Jennifer Lodine-Chaffey

Critical attention to death in Samson Agonistes has been dominated by the question of whether Milton's drama glorified acts of religious terrorism, a question that involves death but unnecessarily narrows it. I seek to reframe our understanding of Samson by looking not only at his aggressive exploits, but also at his movement towards death. The poem illuminates Samson's development of what I call a 'deathly selfhood', which relies on an interior awareness of who he is, rather than on an outward manifestation of his abilities, and only becomes available to him as he nears death.

John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* shows clearly the developmental steps involved in achieving a selfhood that incorporates death into its conception of human identity. Even though many of Milton's most well-known works include sustained examinations of human mortality, including *Lycidas* and *Paradise Lost*, in-depth consideration of Milton's usage of the *ars moriendi*, his personification of death, and his attention to posthumous monument seems to have come to halt in recent decades, perhaps surprisingly so given that Milton actually says a great deal about death.¹ *Lycidas* asks how we should react to the death of those we love, while *Paradise Lost* argues that although human sin brought death into the world, God uses death as 'his final remedy', which ushers in new eternal life.² Milton's engagement with issues of death occurred throughout his life and seems to become more focused as he aged. Indeed, his most sustained work on the subject, the 1671

While the layout is much simpler here than in a STEM article, it conforms to the norms of a humanities journal and is easily identifiable as a work of literary criticism in that it follows the basic title, author, abstract, introduction structure. Unlike the STEM article, the author's affiliation will be at the end, after the works cited.

For a more in-depth discussion about the anatomy of a journal article, watch the following videos from our [Research Tips Thursdays](#) webinar series:

Read Like A Researcher:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=120#oembed-1>

Also consider watching this companion video on strategic note taking:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=120#oembed-2>

How to Take Notes on a Book

Scholarly books can be touchstone works in literary studies. Before reading a whole book, take some steps to see if doing so is necessary for your project. Time is a precious resource and you need to use it wisely! Read book reviews to gauge the book's likely relevance as well as its strengths and weaknesses. Then read the Table of Contents and the Introduction. If there's a specific chapter that seems most relevant, skim it first. If there's a specific detail you're investigating, use the index to find that smaller section. If, however, you decide that the whole book is relevant (or that it's been assigned by your instructor), the following instructions are for you.

Please do not try to remember a whole scholarly book in your head; our brains are not made to process and store this quantity or density of information. Instead, get in the habit of taking notes (separate from the text itself) and making an index of the book as you read. Here are some tips to guide you.

How to Take Notes on a Book

1. Think of your notes as your personal reference for the book. Mark page numbers before each note so you can find your way through the book again later, using your notes as a guide.
2. If you see a key term, jot it down. You can usually identify key terms because they repeat.
3. Sometimes a book will identify its key terms, sometimes not. If you see a term you don't know,

jot it down. If you see a word you know but it's being used in an unfamiliar way, jot it down. It is important to remember that various disciplines and authors use words in a specialized way, and we must be careful to keep their sense of the term. Because of this, try to figure out the meaning of the term from the context before going to a dictionary.

4. Do not add comments, criticize, or "figure out" the author's ideas in your reference notes. The purpose of the notes is to keep a faithful index of the book; if you refer to your notes later, it should be clear which ideas are the author's and which are not. Your comments, questions, and criticisms can be made in a separate column if you choose.
5. Take at least one note per page of text.
6. A note does not have to be a full sentence; fragments are fine.
7. The outline is a very useful form for your notes since it helps to keep track of the parts of an argument including its thesis, sub-claims, evidence, opposing arguments, etc.
8. Don't take too many notes. A map of Utah is useless if it's the same size as Utah. The purpose of note-taking is to have the information in usable (i.e. reduced) form.

Once you have a set of notes on your scholarly readings, go back through them and notice significant patterns. Highlight the notes that stand out to you as most significant or relevant. Make a second set of notes that is more condensed than the first. This second set of notes will be raw materials for your research and writing.

Key Takeaways

Do

Ask questions about the text as you read
Adopt a citation management system
Identify intended audience for each reading
Use strategic skimming
Notice the structure of the reading
Consider the work as a relay (loose model) for your own research and writing
Create an index (set of notes) for books and longer readings

Don't

Read uncritically
Wait to manage your citations
Ignore the question of the intended audience
Read every word of a scholarly work unless it is very significant to your research
Ignore the structure
Overlook the ways you might model your research and writing on the work of others
Read longer works without making an index

Advanced Tip: Talk to People!

Throughout these chapters, we have been emphasizing the idea of scholarship as conversation. This notion extends beyond the written paper to the entire research process... and nowhere is it more important than during your literature review! Just to reiterate this point, here are a few ideas to consider:

- **Talk To Your Instructor:** Don't be afraid to talk to your instructor at different stages of your research. This is a good way to stay on track, make sure the scope and purpose of your project are on target, and to make sure you're finding the right types of sources. Your instructor may also know about important books or articles you haven't discovered yet as well as key researchers or theorists who work in your area:
- **Consult a Librarian:** UCF Libraries offers a research consultation service. It is recommended to schedule an appointment as early in the process as possible. Consultations generally focus on the same search strategies discussed throughout this course, but they will be tailored to your individual project.
- **Interview an Expert:** Whether at UCF or someone you've discovered during your literature review, consider setting up an informational interview. To get started, introduce yourself, briefly describe your research project, explain why you're contacting them, and request an interview or assistance with a specific research problem. You might not get a response from everyone, but you'll be surprised how willing established researchers are to talk to young scholars who show initiative.

CHAPTER 7: LIBRARY SERVICES & RESOURCES

Chapter Seven Objectives

This portion of the course covers key library resources such as literature databases, academic journals, scholarly monographs, and primary source collections. We also discuss key library services for undergrads, connecting with the English librarian, and search tips that will help make your research more efficient. We also cover an often-overlooked skill: citation management, which enables you to compile, organize, and manage your resources efficiently. Managing citations as you go will reduce the stress of the research process

Learning Objectives

Understanding how to efficiently locate relevant literature will free up time for reading and writing. You will learn about library services to help you with your search. A key resource is your subject librarian, who is always available to help. In this chapter, you will learn about:

- Primo, the Libraries online catalog
- Database search strategies
- Key library services such as research consultations, Inter-Library Loan, the Research Tips Thursdays video series, and the office of Scholarly Communication
- Citation management
- Creating search alerts

Introducing Primo!

Primo is the name of the libraries' online catalog. The key access point is located in the center of the Libraries' homepage:

Primo.PNG

Use Primo to search for books/e-books as well as other materials such as media, journals, documents, and more. These formats can be viewed by using the “document type” limiter in the sidebar.

Documents-1.PNG

Virtual Browse: One of the new Primo features is virtual browse, which allows you to see books related to your search. For example, the catalog record for the book James Baldwin: A Critical Study features a visual scroll at the bottom of the record for the following related titles:

Virtual Browse-1.PNG

Uborrow: You can view and request items available at libraries throughout Florida by conducting an “everywhere” search in Primo. This will show the results for items not owned by UCF that can be requested via our Uborrow service. To request an item, simply open the record, sign in with your NID, and follow the prompts to request the item through the Uborrow service:

Uborrow.PNG

Accessing materials from these institutions is fast and easy and a convenient way to be more comprehensive in your research.

To see how all this works together, watch this short video tutorial:



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An Introduction to Primo Search from [UCF Libraries on Vimeo](#).

Library Services & Resources

Topics discussed on this page include:

- [Key Library Resources](#)
- [Literature Databases](#)
- [Related Databases](#)
- [Academic Journals](#)
- [Scholarly Monographs](#)
- [Reference Materials](#)
- [Other Library Services](#)

Key Library Resources

The UCF Libraries provides access to many high-quality subject databases, academic journals, and scholarly monographs as well as reference materials and primary source collections. Knowing how to locate these high-quality resources efficiently will make the research process a stress-free experience.

If you are unsure how to locate these resources, the best starting point will be the [English Database Page](#). The main literature database will be the [MLA International Database](#), which is developed and maintained by the Modern Language Association (MLA).

Before reviewing the different types of resources available to you, let's watch Jada discuss her research process at this stage:



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Jada began by reviewing the scholarship on James Baldwin in MLA, JSTOR, and several African American studies databases. In the discovery stage, Jada is taking snapshots of the scholarship in an attempt to identify recurring themes, concepts, and

connections as well as gaps and tensions in the research that will be her entry into the scholarly conversation. There is a lot of trial and error at this stage. Many students get frustrated when they don't immediately find what they're looking for, but there's a lot of exploration in the early stages of research. Be strategic with your keywords and don't forget to explore multiple subject databases.

For example, Jada explored databases outside literature to incorporate varying perspectives on her topic. The most fruitful of these was an article entitled, "The Sociology of the Ghetto in James Baldwin's 'Sonny's Blues.'"

Throughout this process, Jada discovered two themes she felt were worth exploring: Marxism and critical race theory. While still broad, these are narrow enough to get her started. As she continues with her literature review, she'll want to sharpen these into a more focused research question, a process we will discuss in the next section.

Literature Databases:

- [Modern Language International](#) (MLA): The premier English/literature database. This should be your starting point as it indexes most of the key literature journals.
- [Academic Search Premier](#): Not exclusively an English/literature-specific database, but "ASP" will contain a good variety of literary scholarship and should be part of any literature review.
- [Dictionary of Literary Biography](#): The online version of the classic DLB contains critical essays on the lives, works, and careers of the world's most influential literary figures from all eras and genres.
- [JSTOR](#): A multi-disciplinary full text database that provides access to more than 12 million academic journal articles, books, and primary sources in 75 disciplines.
- [Literature Criticism Online](#): Excerpts and full text of articles and essays providing a critical discussion of authors and their works.
- [Literature Resource Center](#): Information on literary figures from all time periods of writing in such genres as fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, history, journalism, and more. Includes the Dictionary of Literary Biography.
- [Oxford English Dictionary](#): The online version of the OED is widely regarded as the accepted authority on the English language. It is an unsurpassed guide to the meaning, history, and pronunciation of 600,000 words—past and present—from across the English-speaking world.
- [Project Muse](#): An extremely high-quality collection of scholarly journals and e-books from many of the world's leading universities and scholarly societies.

Related Databases

As literary studies become increasingly multi-disciplinary, it is wise to search for scholarship in other subject databases such as Historical Abstracts, PsycInfo (Psychology), ERIC (education), Film and Television Literature Index, the Philosopher's Index, and others.

You can access these and many more on our [main database page](#).

Academic Journals

Searching core journals by title can be beneficial as well. This can be a smaller, more controlled search that will provide insight into current trends in your field and can also help you track down specific citations. To access journals individually, click on "Journals List" below the Primo Search bar on the Libraries' homepage:

Journals.PNG

From there, you can search journals by title, keyword, or browse by discipline. For example, typing "digital humanities" into the search bar will show you all the journals we have access to with that phrase in the subject or title.



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Scholarly Monographs

Although much current scholarship can be accessed in online journals and databases, books are still common and invaluable resources. These can be accessed by conducting a [Primo search](#). When conducting your literature review, focus on books published by university presses and academic publishers. If a book is available electronically, there will be a direct link to that version in the catalog record where it can

be read online &/or downloaded, depending on what kind of access we have to that title.

Reference Materials

Encyclopedia, dictionaries, bibliographies, biographies, scholarly companions, handbooks, and guides are often overlooked resources that can provide essential background information and context for your research topic. The easiest way to locate reference materials is to conduct a keyword search in [Primo](#), and add one of the above terms to your query.

You can also run a general search in Primo and, once you have some results, use the “Library Section/Area” filter in the sidebar to isolate reference materials. This same strategy can be used to locate media, documents, and other specialized formats.

You can also use a database called [Reference Universe](#) to search our entire reference collection at once. This tool is useful in locating resources that are easily overlooked but which can be useful for your research. The results will not only point you to specific books with information on your topic, but they’ll provide the exact page number as well!

Other Library Services

- **Research Consultations:** Jada mentioned the importance of talking to professors or scheduling a consultation with a subject librarian. Both of these are often underutilized resources. Professors with expertise on your topic are often happy to talk to students and make book or article recommendations. Likewise, subject librarians are available to meet with students to discuss their research strategies. You can schedule an appointment with the librarian in your field by filling the [consultation request form](#).
- **Research Tips Thursdays:** Are you interested in becoming a better researcher? Want to waste less time during the research process so you can write better papers? Join us for Research Tips Thursdays! This webinar series highlights a

different research tip every month including Identifying the Best Sources for Your Major, Using Popular Tools to Fuel Your Research, stress-free searching, enhancing your presentation skills, and more. See the [Research Tips Thursdays](#) guide for a full schedule.

- **Inter-Library Loan:** Request books/articles from other libraries through our Inter-library Loan (ILL) by submitting a request through your [ILLiad account](#).
- **Scholarly Communication:** Contains useful information for all aspects of the research process including collaboration tools, data management plans, citation management, ethics & compliance, copyright, Creative Commons, grant planning, and more. See the full list [here](#).

Database Search Strategies

Database Search Tips

This section covers several database search tips including Boolean Operators, wild-cards, and shortcuts that will make your research more efficient.

Quotation Marks: Placing quotes around a phrase will join those words together instead of searching them separately. This can be extremely useful if you are dealing with a phrase that consists of common words such as social AND media. In this case, you can eliminate many unrelated results by searching “social media” instead.

Boolean Operators: Strategically incorporating **And, Or, and Not** into your searches will help you get better results by narrowing or expanding your search and by eliminating unnecessary terms from your results.

Examples

- **And:** Adding this to your search will create a narrow set of results. For example, combining social media AND digital literacy will only retrieve results that contain those two terms. Your results will be more narrow in focus.
- **Or:** Conversely, searching social media OR digital literacy will expand your search by retrieving results with either one of those terms.
- **Not:** This will narrow your results by excluding a term that is irrelevant to you. For example, searching social media NOT digital literacy will eliminate a term that occurs frequently in James Baldwin searchers. If that's not the focus of your research, excluding it from your results can help streamline the search process.

The Boolean operators will be located in the drop down menu within a database's advanced search options. For example, this is what they look like in MLA:

MLA_8.JPG

Truncation Symbols: Including asterisks, question marks, and exclamation points

can help streamline your searches by ensuring that you are capturing word variations and alternate spellings.

Examples

- **Asterisks:** Placing an * at the point where the spelling of a word could change will search for every variation of that word. For example, when dealing with James Baldwin, race and racism will be a recurring theme. You can save time by searching for rac* which will retrieve results for race, racism, racialized, racial, and raced.
- **Exclamation Points:** Used for searching variations of the same word with alternative spellings. For example, wom!n = women or woman.
- **Question Marks:** Useful for searching words and names with alternate spellings, such as British and American variants or words that are translated in slightly different ways. For example, colo?r = color and colour.

Now that you're adept at finding high-quality resources, the next step will be to think about how to organize and manage all that research.

Citation Management

Citation Management

Students often overlook the importance of managing and organizing their research as part of the literature review. There are many programs available online, such as Zotero, and The Libraries offers free access to software such as Endnote. There is no one proper way to manage your research, but it's important to have a system that works for you.

As you continue down your path to becoming a researcher, one of two things tends to happen. A) you have a closet full of printed journal articles that you are saving “just in case” but you have no idea what’s in there or why it was important or B) you are constantly trying to remember what that one article was that you read that one time, but wasn’t relevant so you threw it away (or C) all of the above.

Luckily there are citation management programs to help you wrangle and organize your research. As a bonus, they will format your bibliography into the appropriate style at the click of a button.

Let’s watch Jada discuss her approach to managing her research:



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There are many citation management options to choose from. The key is to find the one that works best with your research style. The three most popular options freely available to UCF students are Endnote, Mendeley, and Zotero. To help get started, see the following sites:

- [Endnote User Guide](#)
- [Mendeley](#)
- [Zotero](#)

For more information about each option, check out the UCF library's [guides to citation management](#). Looking for an easy way to compare features? See [this chart](#) created and maintained by Penn Libraries.

Advanced Tip: Creating Search Alerts

Databases, journals, and Google Scholar allow you to set up alerts based on author names or keywords to help researchers stay current in their subject areas. This is done by entering your email address along with your selected keywords to receive a notification any time a new article is published that matches your criteria. One word of caution: while search alerts are effective tools, they can be overwhelming if you create too many, so be selective.

For more information about how this is done, watch this short tutorial:



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CHAPTER EIGHT: USING GOOGLE SCHOLAR

Chapter Eight Objectives

This chapter focuses on a key companion to library resources: *Google Scholar*. Although we focused on subject databases in the previous unit, Google Scholar can be a helpful addition to any literature review as well. Not only does it capture resources not available directly through UCF, but it includes useful tools such as journal and author alerts, the “cited by” feature, journal metrics, author profiles, and more. We review these and other research tools and show you how to use Google Scholar in tandem with our subject databases.

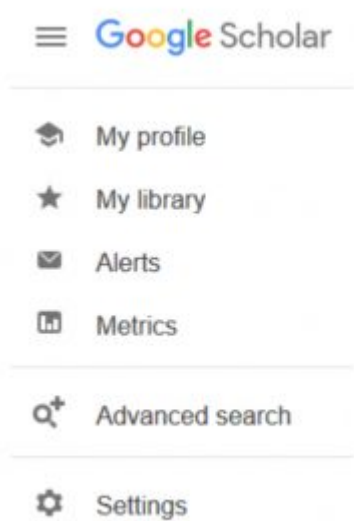
Learning Objectives

This chapter will help you to understand how Google Scholar works as a companion to the library system.

- Start in Google Scholar and connect back to UCF through the Library Link feature to retrieve the full text or to request an article via Inter Library Loan.
- Expand from the library to Google Scholar to expand your search, do citation chaining, set up journal alerts, view author profiles, journal metrics, and more.
- Use Google Scholar to link directly to citation management programs such as EndNote, Mendeley, and Zotero. Not only with these services help you organize and manage your citations, they'll format your final bibliography as well.

Google Scholar features

Google Scholar is an invaluable companion to our subject databases and should be part of any literature review. This section will provide an overview of Google Scholar as well as some tips to make your search more efficient and comprehensive. Many of the features are located in the settings menu, which is accessed by clicking the three bars in the upper left of the Google Scholar home page:



Some of the features contained in Google Scholar are obvious and intuitive. Others, more hidden. Let's take a closer look at full-text options for accessing resources.

- [UCF library links](#)
- [More Full-text options](#)

UCF library links

This feature allows you to connect to your home library so you'll be routed through the UCF proxy when trying to retrieve an article.

To enable this setting:

1. **click** on the menu in the upper left **settings/Library Links**
2. **Type** "University of Central Florida" in the search bar.

Once you've done this, a link to the UCF Libraries will appear to the right of your results for all the selections we have direct access to.

▼ Watch this short video for an example of how this works:



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More Full-Text Options

In addition to full text available at UCF, you will see other options for accessing material from Open Access journals, institutional repositories, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, and other resources. Note that, in some cases, you may be linking to pre-published versions or other variants that may not have copyright clearance.

If you want to verify the validity of a document, you can request the final published version from [Inter-Library Loan](#)

▼ Watch this short video for an example of how this works:



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Validating resources

As we established before, Google Scholar is a tool that can be used in conjunction with others to find valid resources in our research. In this sense, we can establish the trajectory of an author as well as the importance and influence of a certain journal in our field of study.

- [Author Profiles](#)
- [Journal Metrics](#)

Author Profiles

If an author's name is underlined in green, that indicates that they have a Google Scholar Account. For example, when searching "social media in writing classrooms," I noted that a recent book by Ken Hyland has a high citation count:



*An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
<https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=261#h5p-3>*

Clicking on his underlined name links to his [profile page](#) where you can get an overview of his research interests, publications, citation counts, and even a list of his co-authors. Google Scholar also ranks his publications by citation to illustrate which of his works are making the biggest impact in the field. You can also follow authors to stay current with their research.

Journal Metrics

The Metrics link allows you to search for the highest-ranking journals by field. The rankings are determined by the "h5" index, which documents the number of articles published in a journal over the last five years that have been cited at least ten times. The first page shows the rankings for all scholarly journals, which include Nature, The New England Journal of Medicine, and Science as the top three. From there, you can click on the categories tab to view the results by discipline:



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<https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=261#h5p-4>

Advanced Tip: Citation Chaining

Citation chaining is a process through which you can track the development of a topic backward and forward in time. For example, it is common to “mine the bibliography” of an article to see who the author(s) cited during their research. The reverse of this process is to track the activity around a work of scholarship after publication. How often has it been cited? Who has cited it? What are other researchers saying about it? Google Scholar and Web of Science are the two resources that offer this feature.

>> Move the slide bar below the picture to follow the steps <<



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:
<https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=265#h5p-6>

This strategy is useful when you’ve found one or two articles that you want to use in your paper. You can then expand the scope of those resources by mining their bibliographies to see who they cited, then go to Google scholar to see who cited them. Citation chaining can also give you some insight into where those authors fit within the scholarly conversation on their topics.

Related Articles

Similar to the above, the related articles link will retrieve a set of results that may be relevant based on your search criteria. Watch this short video for more information about finding sources from citations:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=265#oembed-1>

CHAPTER NINE: EVALUATING SCHOLARLY RESOURCES

Chapter Nine Objectives

This chapter focuses on ways to select resources that are relevant, significant, and trustworthy. In other words, we need to address the issue of authority, which is the trust we grant to reliable sources of information. With so much misinformation and disinformation flooding our society, we need to be extremely careful. How do we handle the question of “bias”? Is it always a bad thing? How important is currency (the most recent information)?

Learning Objectives

Use this chapter to help you

- Evaluate which sources are most credible and why.
- Learn to select the best sources to establish your authority on your subject.
- Join the fight against misinformation and disinformation.

Finding Trustworthy Resources

This page addresses several questions: How do we know which sources to trust? What sources will our audience find most relevant and significant? How important is currency (not money, but information that is the most recent)? Should we be concerned about whether a source is “biased”? How do we avoid repeating misinformation to our audience? At the heart of these questions is the issue of “authority,” which is the trust we grant to reliable sources of information.

Authority is Constructed and Contextual

Information resources reflect their creators' expertise and credibility, and are evaluated based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used. Authority is constructed in that various communities may recognize different types of authority. It is contextual in that the information need may help to determine the level of authority required.¹

What makes a useful resource will differ by discipline and the scope of your project. For example, currency, meaning the work was published more recently, is extremely important in the sciences but not always so in the humanities where scholars routinely work with classic texts. In the digital humanities, and in any field that deals with digital media, things will develop faster and, therefore, currency will be more relevant.

As you conduct your literature review, you should be aware of criteria such as currency, relevance, authority, and purpose, but do so with what the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) calls an “attitude of informed skepticism and

1. Association of College and Research Libraries. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education." 2016. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

an openness to new perspectives, additional voices, and changes in schools of thought.” Effective researchers “understand the need to determine the validity of the information created by different authorities and to acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ world-views, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations.”

For a more complete overview of constructing authority, see the ACRL Framework . In the meantime, here are some criteria for evaluating the credibility of scholarly resources. Most of these focus on journals but can be applied to any type of academic resource.



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<https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=238#h5p-1>

Aristotle’s Ethos

Aristotle’s term **ethos** evaluates expertise in these terms. Ethos has an ethical dimension and is separate from self-confidence or popularity since it is possible to be self-confident and popular without any ethical grounding. We can get a sense of whether an authority is ethical by investigating how others have evaluated their work. Over time, scholars get a reputation from other scholars who evaluate their knowledge, trustworthiness, and disinterestedness.

Aristotle was suspicious of people who argued for money. Cynically promoting views you don’t agree with in order to profit personally constitutes a form of malpractice. Honest self-advocacy is fine, however. For instance, disabled scholars who advocate for better transportation for people with disabilities do not present ethical problems with their advocacy.

A Note about Bias

We routinely hear that “bias” is bad; therefore, the reasoning goes, if we find a work of scholarship that shows “bias,” we should reject it. But bias itself is not a

problem; unwarranted bias is. If there is a debate about whether the moon is made of cheese or rock, we might hear that both sides of the debate are biased. But the bias of one side is warranted and the bias of the other side is not. As scholars, we are called upon to act as referees, and it is up to us to take sides when necessary. In this example, claiming that both sides are right, or that the truth is in the middle, is a dereliction of our duty as scholars. It is warranted to be biased against the bad behavior or false claims of scholars, but it is not warranted to be biased against good evidence and arguments nor to be biased against scholars based on their race, gender, or other identity categories. If we notice unwarranted bias in the work of other scholars, we have an obligation to point it out in our work.

Avoiding Misinformation, Disinformation, and Dismediation

Good scholarship protects us from *misinformation* (wrong information), *disinformation* (intentionally deceptive information), and *dismediation* (intentionally deceptive efforts to discredit reliable channels of information). Wrong and deceptive information is rampant on public forums and on poor quality media platforms. You should not rely on such sources for factual claims (unless you are a pro who can independently verify the information you get from them – and even then, you will need to explain why you are using such sources instead of scholarly ones).

The institutions that support scholarship, such as granting agencies, peer-reviewed journals, libraries, and so on, rely on gatekeepers to keep bad information out and allow good information in. Of course, no such system is foolproof, so we need to maintain our own critical abilities. The scholarly system, when it works well, polices itself. If a work of misinformation or disinformation gets published, distributed, and archived, we count on other scholars to identify it and demand a retraction or correction.

Discernment

As readers, we bring critical thinking to our research. Gullibility, or trusting too easily, is a problem because it means we are more likely to accept misinformation, disinformation, or dismediation. But we can go too far in the other direction and end up in cynicism – not trusting at all – which leads us to reject reliable sources. For instance, the internet has enormous amounts of information that is true and useful. Refusing to accept it because it's on the internet is as problematic as accepting everything that's on the internet. Our struggle is to practice discernment: when to trust and when not to trust. Discernment requires care and effort.

Our blind spots – gaps in our knowledge – present obstacles to discernment. These gaps make us vulnerable to the Dunning-Kruger effect: “people suffering the most among their peers from ignorance or incompetence fail to recognize just how much they suffer from it.”¹ Researchers need to catch their own assumptions by seeing what others are saying about a source, identifying the unknowns: “gaps in knowledge may go unrecognized in everyday life because people fail to have outside agents hovering over them” (254).

Click on the following link for [a tutorial on SIFT \(Stop, Investigate, Find, Trace\)](#) from Wayne State University, which helps you overcome your blind spots and distinguish good sources from problematic sources.

Aristotle's Ethos

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1. James M. Olson, Mark P. Zanna. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Netherlands, Elsevier Science, 2011, 251.

of cheese or rock, we might hear that both sides of the debate are biased. But the bias of one side is warranted and the bias of the other side is not. As scholars, we are called upon to act as referees, and it is up to us to take sides when necessary. In this example, claiming that both sides are right, or that the truth is in the middle (half cheese/half rock), is a dereliction of our duty as scholars. It is warranted to be biased against the bad behavior or false claims of scholars, but it is not warranted to be biased against good evidence and arguments nor to be biased against scholars based on their race, gender, or other identity categories. If we notice unwarranted bias in the work of other scholars, we have an obligation to point it out in our work.

Key Takeaways

Do

- Understand what constitutes useful information in your discipline and for your project
- Use ACRL standards to determine the credibility of journals in your field
- Ask whether bias in your source material is warranted or unwarranted
- Point out unwarranted bias in the scholarly work we find
- Additional research to determine whether your source contains disinformation, misinformation, or dismediation
- Understand the system of gatekeeping within your discipline

Don't

- Ignore criteria for what constitutes useful information in your discipline and for your project
- Use materials from journals without a clear understanding of their credibility within your field
- Reject sources out of hand because they exhibit bias – first ask whether the bias is unwarranted
- Repeat unwarranted bias without comment
- Repeat disinformation, misinformation, or dismediation without comment
- Ignore the system of gatekeeping within your discipline

Exercises

1. Why do we need gatekeepers in our disciplines?
2. What efforts should you make to ensure source credibility?
3. What are the differences between warranted and unwarranted bias?
4. How significant are the problems of disinformation, misinformation, and dismediation?
5. What was the most important lesson you learned from this module? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the discussion area and find the Evaluating Scholarly Resources Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Evaluation will be a recurring theme in a later chapter when we move into refining and evaluating your research question.

CHAPTER TEN: REFINING AND EVALUATING YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION

Chapter Ten Objectives

This chapter focuses on the art of crafting a clear, concise research question that will drive your research. Beginning researchers often struggle with the task of framing a research question, but we show how asking critical, open-ended questions about your topic can help you refine your question.

The section titled “Evaluating Your Research Question” aims to help you ensure that your research question is clear, complex, and focused and that the answer is arguable. We cover the key components to a good research question, as well as some of the most common pitfalls to avoid. The focus is on devising an open-ended and arguable question that adds to the discourse rather than answering a simple question.

Learning Objectives

Your thesis statement will answer your research question, so having a polished question is essential to the development of your thesis statement. Hence, this chapter instructs you

- to refine and evaluate your research question.
- to prepare you for positing your thesis statement

Refining Your Research Question

Your instructor may provide you with a research question or may require that you develop a research question of your own. A good research question provides you entry to a scholarly discourse community—the group of scholars concerned about a particular area of knowledge. Your research question should relate to the work of other scholars and should be one that other scholars find relevant and significant. Framing a good research question requires asking lots of other questions. In this unit, you will watch videos of Jada, who discusses how she used an invention process that consisted of “built in” questions, frames, and methodologies that caused her to view James Baldwin’s work in an unexpectedly personal way.

Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers, in turn, develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field.¹

Key Concepts:

- [The Invention Process](#)
- [Asking Critical Questions](#)

You should be developing your research question as you embark on your literature review. Think about developing a clear, concise question that will guide your research. Developing a research question is an *inventive process* that involves ask-

1. Association of College and Research Libraries. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education." 2016. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

ing *critical open-ended questions* such as Who? What? When? Where? and Why? While these questions may seem simple at first, they all perform very specific functions. For example, you may start by asking why something happened (why a literary work was produced at a particular moment in history), but your questions will become increasingly complex as you dig deeper.

Let's watch Jada discuss how this process worked for her:



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The Invention Process

Jada's perspective on Baldwin, which includes Critical Race Theory, comes with "built-in" questions, frames, and methodologies that she will refine through her research. These built-in questions, frames, and methodologies come with the territory of studying Baldwin and his writing. They are questions, frames, and methodologies that have been used by other scholars. We start with existing questions, frames, and methodologies, but then ask what Baldwin has to teach us that we don't already know.

For example, "Sonny's Blues" provides a fictional lens through which we can analyze real events such as drug busts of jazz musicians in New York City, but fictionalized events—such as Sonny's arrest—offer unique insights we don't get from studying statistics or other types of analyses. Jada noted that even though the sociology paper she found provided a unique insight into Baldwin's work, it wasn't as visceral as the experience of reading the story itself, especially its depiction of live jazz performance and other events she could relate to on a more personal level.

These two perspectives work in tandem: "Sonny's Blues" dramatized something that felt very real to Jada, which prompted her to ask the types of questions that will drive her research about Baldwin and "Sonny's Blues."

Asking Critical Questions

Jada began with an overly broad idea about the intersection of race and class, which is common at this stage. Then she began narrowing her topic into a more refined research question by asking critical questions about how Baldwin dealt with these issues in the story. Her focus moved more specifically to questions about urbanization, addiction, and jazz: issues that are as relevant today as they were then, which is why Baldwin remains such a touchstone for scholars in literature and related fields, such as sociology.

Is this topic still too broad for one research project? Jada's next step is to evaluate her question to see if it can be further refined.

Evaluating Your Research Question

How do you know when you have posed a good research question? Below we discuss several criteria for evaluating your research question. Keep reworking your research question until it meets all the criteria.

Evaluating Your Research Question

The spectrum of inquiry ranges from asking simple questions that depend upon basic recapitulation of knowledge to increasingly sophisticated abilities to refine research questions, use more advanced research methods, and explore more diverse disciplinary perspectives.¹

Key Concepts:

- Is your question clear, complex, and focused?
- Is your answer arguable?

Once you have developed a workable research question, the next step is to ensure that it's clear, complex, focused, and that the answer is arguable. This brings us back to the conversation analogy: Will others in your field – your audience – want to discuss your question? Will your findings add anything meaningful to the discourse and keep the conversation going?

1. Association of College and Research Libraries. "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education." 2016. <https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

Criteria for Evaluating Your Research Question

- Are you filling a gap or solving a problem? (Either is fine – just know which direction your research is going)
- Is your question loaded or leading? (If so, keep refining your question)
- Is your question too broad or narrow? (If so, keep refining your question)
- Is the scope of your project realistic and researchable within the given timeframe? (If not, keep refining your question)
- Do you have the tools &/or technology needed to accomplish your task? (If not, keep refining your question)
- Do you have access to the information and resources you will need? (If not, keep refining your question)

Let's watch Jada discuss how she evaluated the question she discussed in the last section:



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A key point is to avoid questions with easy 'yes' or 'no' answers. Those kinds of questions generally end the discussion and the goal of your research should be to add to the discussion by making an arguable claim. At the time Jada wrote her paper, her research question centered around why James Baldwin and "Sonny's Blues" are still relevant today. However, now that we've been through the refining and evaluation process, we see that she could further narrow her question to focus on topics such as urbanization, race, and addiction. For instance, how did urbanization after World War II affect the lives of black people? Did changes in urban life lead to more addiction among black people? What does Baldwin's story teach us about these issues and what can we learn from them about urbanization, race, and addiction today?

As we discussed in the Scholarship as Conversation section, the issues addressed by Baldwin are largely unsolved problems that are part of a productive paradigm that continues to engage researchers from many fields. Jada could expand on what

she started here by adding her personal perspective with her findings from her research in literature and sociology.

If you are still unsure if your question is refined enough, Wendy Belcher, author of *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks*, suggests talking through your research question with a friend or advisor. She also suggests writing an abstract and sending it to a friend or advisor for review. Even if an abstract is not required for your assignment, consider writing one and soliciting feedback as Belcher suggests. Feedback can be invaluable since at this point you are looking for your place to jump into the conversation.

Exercises

1. What is your research question?
2. Does it meet all the criteria for a good research question listed in the page?
 - Is your question clear, complex, and focused?
 - Is your answer arguable?
 - Are you filling a gap or solving a problem? (Either is fine – just know which direction your research is going)
 - Is your question loaded or leading? (If so, keep refining your question)
 - Is your question too broad or narrow? (If so, keep refining your question)
 - Is the scope of your project realistic and researchable within the given timeframe? (If not, keep refining your question)
 - Do you have the tools &/or technology needed to accomplish your task? (If not, keep refining your question)
 - Do you have access to the information and resources you will need? (If not, keep refining your question)
3. Using the criteria in this page, try to assess one or more of these research questions:
 - “Will ‘Sonny’s Blues’ will help us solve the problem of racism today?”
 - “Why should we teach ‘Sonny’s Blues’ in the classroom?”
 - “Does ‘Sonny’s Blues’ encourage people to appreciate Black culture?”
 - “How did ‘Sonny’s Blues’ change the conversation about race and addiction?”
4. If you have read “Sonny’s Blues,” posit a research question that might work better than those above.
5. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or

difficult to understand?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the discussion area and find **Positing and Evaluating Your Research Question**. Participate in the discussion.

Advanced Tip: Writing an Abstract

Put simply, an abstract is a 150-250-word paragraph that provides a quick overview of your paper. Publications may have specific requirements for what to include in an abstract but, in general, they include your research purpose, methodologies, methods, key evidence, results and conclusion. Most undergraduate students would never consider writing an abstract for an assigned research paper. However, as we will discuss here, writing an abstract, especially early in your process, can be an effective way to evaluate your research question.

Before we begin, watch this short video with Jessica, a Texts & Technology graduate student, discuss the importance of the abstract:



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Jessica referenced Wendy Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* in which Belcher suggests talking through your argument with a friend/colleague/advisor. She also suggests writing an abstract early in the writing process and sending it to friends/colleagues/advisors for review. Jessica also noted the "natural reflexivity" that happens when she's reading literature, analyzing data, and targeting a particular journal. She's listening to lots of scholars while looking for her place to jump into the conversation. When she does, she'll need to have something meaningful to add to the discourse on her topic.

Even if you're not planning to present on or publish your paper right away, the exercise of writing an abstract can help you articulate your purpose, framework, methodologies, methods, scope, results, and conclusions. If there are any aspects of your project that remain unclear, this process will help you iron them out.

Tips for Writing a Good Abstract

- What makes your work unique? The answer may be in your methods, how you apply theory to a research problem, and where your research fits and builds upon other research.
- Do you need to include more critical context? Such context showcases the importance of your work in relation to others, and it helps the readers know how it relates to the field.
- What is the “problem” and your “solution”? This question is another way for you to think about the purpose of your study. The problem may just be a gap in the current literature.
- Do you list the most important aspects of your methods and results? This synopsis usually indicates the “meat and potatoes” of your work. Just as you may look for studies with abstracts detailing methodology akin to how you want to do research, think about others reading your abstract, perhaps with the same intent.
- Is your abstract coherent? Invite someone unfamiliar with your work to read your abstract. Can that person understand it? Use complete sentences and active verbs, if possible. It is important for your work to be understandable and as engaging as possible, while at the same time being concise.
- How do you conclude your abstract? Are you listing the main takeaways for the reader?

Even if you don’t need to write an abstract for your assignment, doing so can be an effective way to evaluate your research question. Start early and revise it as your research develops. Your abstract should evolve along with your project and it can be a strong indicator of what’s missing and what needs adjusting. Leaving the abstract for the very last step is common, even among experienced researchers, but we recommend approaching this as an ongoing exercise rather than a final chore.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: RESEARCH AS AN INFERENTIAL AND CRITICAL PROCESS / RELATING THE CONCEPTUAL AND THE CONCRETE

Chapter Eleven Objectives

Much of this chapter deals with constructing cohesive arguments. In “Research as an Inferential and Critical Process,” we discuss how inferences allow us to move from one thought to another; they are the pathways by which thinking occurs.

In “Relating the Conceptual and the Concrete,” we return to our analogy between argumentative writing and law by focusing on how to use deductive logic to make your case. A good detective or lawyer alternates between the conceptual and concrete, just as you should in your research project. Deductive logic uses syllogisms, which are three-part structures that tell us what to think about a specific case (person, place, thing, group, event, etc.).

Learning Objectives

Keep the detective analogy in mind as you work through this chapter. Much like a detective, researchers use deductive, inductive, and abductive logic to make sense of their material. The most important lessons you will learn are

- To ask critical questions
- To note claims that follow from a given proposition (or statement of facts)

Research as an Inferential and Critical Process

We discuss the following topics on this page:

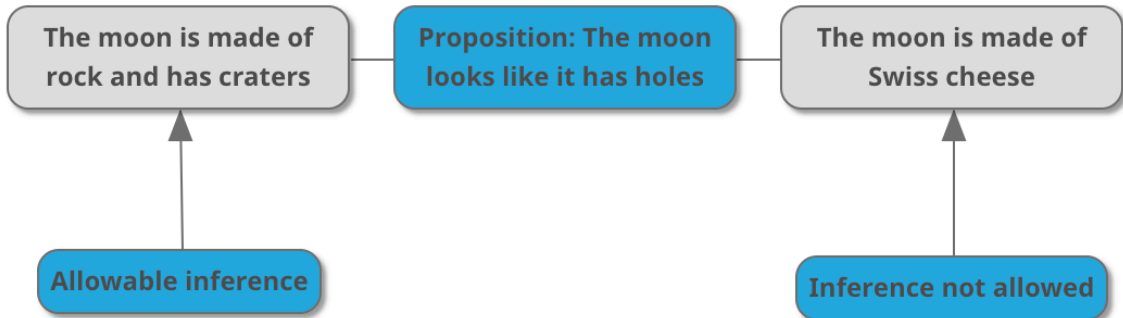
- [Inferences](#)
- [Reasoning](#)
- [Prototype, Template, and Procedural Knowledge](#)
- [Ideology](#)

Inferences

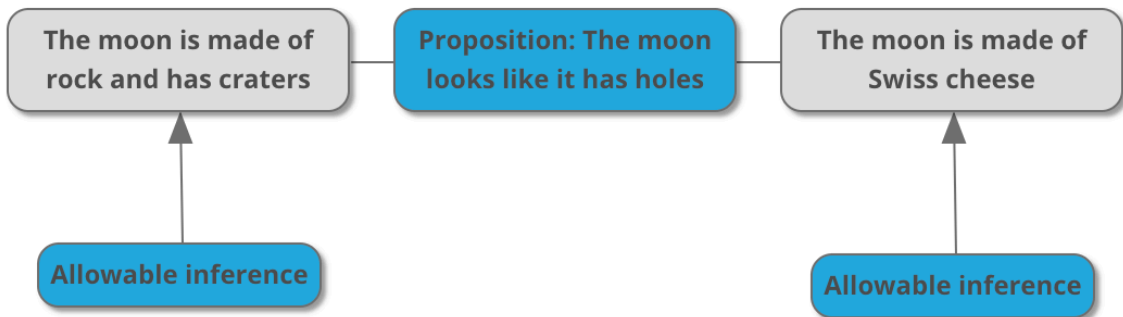
Without inferences, there is no thinking, critical or otherwise. Inferences allow us to move from one thought to another; they are the pathways by which thinking occurs. To think inferentially is to ask questions about pieces of information. What does this information tell us? Does it support our hypothesis or challenge it? If the information is true, what other claims follow logically from it? What additional knowledge is required to make sense of the information?

Thinking critically requires us to restrict ourselves to *allowable* inferences. For instance, we can observe that the surface of the moon is not smooth but appears to have holes in it. If we conclude that the moon is made of cheese (like a piece of Swiss cheese) we have made an inference, but for science it is not an allowable one; in poetry, the inference that the moon is made of cheese is just fine. We can thus think of different areas of knowledge as having different rules for inferences, just as different games have different rules of play.

Scientific Reasoning



Poetic Reasoning



Reasoning

Reasoning is the process of putting inferences together. There are many kinds of reasoning; one of the common, called *abductive reasoning*, involves reasoning about causation. If we see a house on fire, we reason that there must have been a cause. Was it an accident or was the fire set intentionally? Without more information, we are merely *speculating*, or reasoning with insufficient information.

A common mistake in abductive reasoning is to assume that *correlation* equals *causation*. Correlation means that two things merely appear together. For example, if we see a box of matches at the scene of a fire, we might assume that the matches were used to start the fire. Yet the appearance of the matches merely correlates with the appearance of the fire. Unless we can rule out other causes, we can't conclude with any certainty that these matches caused the fire. Similarly, if we discover that two authors met once, we do not have enough information to conclude that a literary work written by one author was intended as a response to the other author. We can speculate, but we must indicate that it is only a speculation.

Some types of reasoning are very loose and allow multiple *associations*. Let's take a hypothetical car advertisement in which a shiny new car is parked in the middle of a football field while a male peacock walks around the car with its colorful tail fanned out. The advertisers probably want us to reason that the car is tough since we associate football with toughness. They may also want us to reason that the car is eye-catching, like the peacock. We might make any number of inferences from this scene, such as that the car is supposed to impress and intimidate (which is what male peacocks do with their display) and that it will grant the car's future owner the same powers. Such associative reasoning can help us understand metaphors and allusions in literary works.

Prototype, Template, and Procedural Knowledge

We build inferences from our knowledge of how the world works. This knowledge can be divided into types: prototype, template, and procedural.

1. **Prototype** knowledge tells us what category or class something belongs to; it can help us relate a literary work to a genre, period, or movement.
2. **Template** knowledge allows us to see patterns (such as the system of rank in the military); in literary studies, templates can include narrative structures and symbolic systems.
3. **Procedural** knowledge is about how a process (like eating or riding a bicycle) is done; in literary studies, procedural knowledge can help us understand the composition of a work, the distribution process, the reading process, interpretation, and so on.

When we are trying to understand new information, we usually bring prototype, template, and procedural forms of knowledge together with the new information. For example, in writing about “Sonny’s Blues,” we need to know that segregation existed in America and separated black and white communities (and that we are still living in the legacy of that separation). Our knowledge about the period of official segregation is prototype knowledge. We can make sense of the relationship between the narrator and his brother using template knowledge. Procedural knowledge can help us understand the causes and effects of addiction.

Writing a research paper involves problem solving (research question being the problem). You have to relate the information in the problem (the research question) with the research material you find — and the relevant prototype, template, and procedural knowledge — before making your inferences. If you don’t follow this process, you won’t be able to solve the problem successfully (unless you just make a lucky guess — but even then you still have to support your argument!).

Your paper should demonstrate to your reader how you made your inferences; by doing so, you are providing a *warrant* for your claims by explaining how you move from one proposition to another. Your reader should be able to clearly explain to a third person how you reached your conclusion.

Ideology

Keep in mind that prototype, template, and procedural knowledge are culturally and historically specific and that they represent the “ideology” of a culture. In other

words, this knowledge is not necessarily objective reality. It contains within it a whole set of assumptions about how the world works and these assumptions may be wrong or may serve the interests of a particular group at the expense of another. For example, race, class, nationality, profession, gender, and sexual identity can be understood in terms of prototype, template, and procedural knowledge, but this knowledge may be based in outdated and oppressive ways of thinking such as crude stereotypes. We must use prototype, template, and procedural knowledge to produce a research project, but should be aware that all such knowledge deserves scrutiny.

Literary theories, such as feminist, psychoanalytic, new historical, Marxist, etc. provide their own versions of prototype, template, and procedural knowledge. Such knowledge is also subject to scrutiny, but scholars have recognized much of it as valuable for making inferences within the field of literary studies. When writing a literary studies research paper, you should familiarize yourself with the prototype, template, and procedural knowledge related to your chosen theory.

Relating the Conceptual and the Concrete

Just as a lawyer in a courtroom alternates between presenting legal principles (concepts) and a specific case (concrete facts), you need to alternate between the conceptual and concrete when you present your argument to readers. Generally, researchers use *deductive* reasoning to make their case to their readers. Deductive reasoning uses *sylogisms*, which are three-part structures (two premises and a conclusion) that tell us what to think about a particular case. In deductive logic you need to prove both premises are true and prove that the conclusion must follow from the premises.

Examples

A syllogism is

1. [Major premise – conceptual] The Black Aesthetic is defined as literature or art that seeks to remember history, define identity, gain recognition, and celebrate blackness;
2. [Minor premise – concrete] ‘Sonny’s Blues’ seeks to remember history, define identity, gain recognition, and celebrate blackness;
3. [Conclusion] Therefore, ‘Sonny’s Blues’ is an example of the Black Aesthetic.

The major premise is about a broad *concept* (the Black Aesthetic) and its general principles and purposes. The minor premise is concrete since it is about a particular case: the James Baldwin’s story “Sonny’s Blues.” The conclusion results from applying the conceptual principle to the particular case.

Our sample syllogism is not very good, however, since it tells us something that we already knew or could discover easily. We can make a better argument by considering a specific problem. Addiction is one of the themes in “Sonny’s Blues.” A relevant research question might be: “How does the Black Aesthetic help us to understand or solve the problem of addiction?” The thesis, or answer, might have something to

do with figuring out how the loss of history, identity, recognition, and celebrations of blackness draws some black people into addiction and how the restoration of those things might help prevent addiction or help addicts recover.

If we pursue this line of inquiry, we can keep our syllogism above, but we need to add a new one to it:

Example

1. [Major Premise] Sometimes addiction is a response to *anomie*, which Emile Durkheim conceptualized to mean rootlessness, alienation, and a lack of belonging.
2. [Minor Premise] Black people (such as Sonny) have experienced *anomie* because they have lost much of their history and identity to racism.
3. [Conclusion] Therefore, black people (such as Sonny) are more likely to turn to addiction.

Here you need to define key concepts and show how they apply to the particular case of Sonny. You need to support your major premise; how strong is the theory that *anomie* is a cause of addiction? You also have to explain what “sometimes” and “more likely” mean; are there statistics you can find?

When we find data that supports a major premise, we are using *inductive* reasoning. The deductive syllogism we discussed earlier moved from general principle (about addiction and *anomie*) to a specific case (Sonny’s experiences with *anomie* as a result of racism). The inductive argument moves the opposite way; it gathers specific cases from the real world (found in scientific studies) to see if there is a strong relationship between addiction and *anomie*, and between *anomie* and racism. If we can support our premises through inductive reasoning, then our deductive argument is more secure.

You have to expect possible counter-arguments. For instance, in “Sonny’s Blues,” Sonny plays music that is integral to black history and identity, so has he really lost a sense of black history and identity? It is Sonny’s non-addicted brother, our narrator, who realizes that he, much more than Sonny, has lost a sense of black history and identity. Given this information, should we give up on our argument? Not necessarily! Sonny’s music may not solve the problem of his addiction, but it may keep him

from getting worse. The narrator, though not an addict, may be suffering in other ways as a result of his loss of black history and identity. Carefully assess the *scientific*, *historical*, and *textual* evidence to make your argument.

An *abductive* argument is about the causal relationships of events. It is similar to the reasoning that detectives and doctors use every day when they see a result (evidence of crime or illness) and reason backwards to determine its causes. The deductive argument about Sonny's addiction discussed above could be reframed as an abductive argument, reasoning from results to causes. What caused Sonny's addiction? Were there multiple factors? Often with abductive arguments we need to gather more evidence to make sure we have identified the correct causes.

Conductive reasoning is associative logic based on resemblance, puns, homonyms, and images. It explains how we make associations, such as the way people get nicknames. A famous nickname, used in "Sonny's Blues," is the name "Bird," referring to jazz musician Charlie Parker. How did Parker get the name "Bird"? There are many theories:

The origin stories about his nickname Yardbird (usually shortened to Bird) include that it derived from a cousin mispronouncing his name as "Yarlie", and that it was conferred by a musician after Parker rescued a chicken that had been struck by a car and then had it cooked for dinner. The most convincing explanation is the one provided by trombonist Clyde Bernhardt, in his autobiography *I Remember*. "Charlie told me he got the name 'Yardbird' because he was crazy about eating chicken: fried, baked, boiled, stewed, anything. Down there in the South, all chickens are called yardbirds."¹

A research paper into "Sonny's Blues" might examine the ways in which conductive reasoning functions in black subcultures such as jazz.

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/charlie-bird-parker-death-jazz-musician-saxophonist-miles-davis-a9689511.html>

CHAPTER TWELVE: POSITING A THESIS STATEMENT AND COMPOSING A TITLE / DEFINING KEY TERMS

Chapter Twelve Objectives

Many novice researchers struggle with crafting an effective thesis statement. We walk you through the steps of writing a good thesis statement and provide examples of thesis statements gone wrong. We also discuss an underrated skill: composing a title.

From there we discuss the importance of defining your terms. In “Scholarship as Conversation,” we explain how to avoid the “hit and run” citation style in which quotes are strung together with little or no context. We previously emphasized the importance of using strategic keywords in your research, but part of your job as a writer is to define and contextualize those terms for your audience. Some terms may have multiple meanings; the definitions you provide will allow your audience to know how you understand them.

Learning Objectives

Keep the conversation analogy in mind as you work through this chapter. You will learn

- How to posit a thesis statement.
- How to compose a title.
- Why it's necessary to define your key term.

Positing a Thesis Statement and Composing a Title

- [Positing a Thesis Statement](#)
- [Composing a Title](#)

Positing a Thesis Statement

We *formulate* a thesis statement by developing it until it is ready. Then we *posit* the thesis statement as part of a scholarly discussion. To posit is to put something in place, to take a position.

State your thesis clearly and place it in your paper before you state your overview of the supporting arguments that follow. A thesis statement effectively identifies your position and situates your ideas in the context of existing discourse. An effective thesis statement has the following features:

1. It answers a research question
2. It is arguable, meaning other answers are possible, but they are not as strong as the thesis you are stating
3. It takes a side in an argument (and gives your readers a choice to agree or disagree)
4. It is clearly stated
5. It is specific
6. It is relevant
7. It is compelling
8. It organizes all the points made in the rest of the paper

Composing a Title

Once you formulate your thesis statement, you will be prepared to create a title for

your research project. Think of your title as a tool that helps other scholars select materials that best fit *their* needs. For example, if your title does not include the name of the literary work you are discussing, the author's name, the theory, or method that you are using, your title may not be clear enough to help another researcher make a choice. Your paper may fit their needs perfectly, but if you do not include enough information in your title, that researcher is likely to skip over your work.

Your title can include a reference to your thesis statement. The title can thus function as an additional way of stating an argument, and help your reader know what to expect from your paper.

Example

The Downfall of the Southern Gentry: A Marxist Reading of William Faulkner's "Barn Burning"

A common technique is to break the title into two parts separated by a colon, as in the example. One part indicates the topic or thesis and the other indicates the literary work, theory, or method.

Exercises

1. What is your thesis statement?
2. Does it meet all the criteria for a good thesis statement listed in the page?
3. What is your title?
4. Does your title indicate the literary work, theory and/or method, and hint at the thesis?
5. What was the most important lesson you learned from this page? What point was confusing or difficult to understand?
6. Using the criteria above, assess what is wrong with these thesis statements and suggest ways to improve them:
 - "Some people say that 'Sonny's Blues' will help us solve the problem of racism today, but

some people say it won't."

- "Most people support the idea of teaching 'Sonny's Blues' in the classroom."
- "Does 'Sonny's Blues' encourage people to appreciate Black culture?"
- "There are numerous types of effects that result from reading 'Sonny's Blues.'"
- "I am angry about the way 'Sonny's Blues' has been neglected."
- "Maybe 'Sonny's Blues' is not the best text for understanding Black culture."
- "Teaching 'Sonny's Blues' is inappropriate."
- "The real reason why 'Sonny's Blues' became famous is a mystery."

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussions area and find the Positing a Thesis Statement and Composing a Title Discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Defining Key Terms

Earlier in this course, we discussed how to conduct a library search using key terms. Here we discuss how to present key terms. Place yourself in your audience's position and try to anticipate their need for information. Is your audience composed mostly of novices or professionals? If they are novices, you will need to provide more definition and context for your key concepts and terms.

Because disciplinary knowledge is filled with specialized terms, an ordinary dictionary is of limited value. Disciplines like psychology, cultural studies, and history use terms in ways that are often different from the way we communicate in daily life. Some disciplines have their own dictionaries of key terms. Others may have terms scattered throughout glossaries in important primary texts and textbooks.

Key terms are the “means of exchange” in disciplines. You gain entry into the discussion by demonstrating how well you know and understand them. Some disciplinary keywords can be tricky because they mean one thing in ordinary speech but can mean something different in the discipline. For instance, in ordinary speech, we use the word *shadow* to refer to a darker area produced by an object or person between a light source and a surface. In Jungian psychology, *shadow* refers to the unconscious or unknown aspects of a personality. Sometimes there is debate within a discipline about what key terms mean or how they should be used.

To avoid confusion, define all key terms in your paper before you begin a discussion about them. Even if you think your audience knows the definition of key terms, readers want to see how *you* understand the terms before you move ahead. If a definition is contested—meaning different writers define the term in different ways—make sure you acknowledge these differences and explain why you favor one definition over the others. Cite your sources when presenting key terms and concepts.

Key Takeaways

Do

Define key terms

Look for definitions of key terms in disciplinary texts before consulting general-use dictionaries

Explore the history of the term to see if its meaning has changed over time

If the meaning of a term is contested, present these contested definitions to your reader and explain why you favor one over the others

Even if you think your audience knows the term, assume they care what your understanding is

Don't

Present key terms without definitions

Assume that ordinary dictionaries will provide you with the best definitions of disciplinary terms

Assume that the meaning of a term has stayed the same over years, decades, or centuries

Present a contested term without explanation

Assume your audience doesn't care about your understanding of a key term

Formatting and Style Guidelines: MLA and APA

Scholars format their work using the style guidelines provided by professional organizations such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the American Psychological Association (APA). These two are the most common, but far from the only, style guidelines used by researchers in the Humanities. Most student projects rely on these guidelines for document formatting, in-text citation, and works-cited lists. Your instructor should let you know which formatting style is required or whether you are allowed to choose one.

- [MLA 8th Edition Formatting and Style Guide](#)
- [APA Formatting and Style Guide](#)

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE WRITING PROCESS

Chapter Thirteen Objectives

Once you have synthesized your research materials and are ready to address your audience with a clear purpose in mind, you should start the process of putting your research in a presentable form. We start this chapter with a page on “Writer’s Block,” a common affliction to writers. We argue that writer’s block can be a productive period because working through the blocks prepares us to solve problems and become stronger writers. “Structures” are there to help writers organize their ideas, which will help readers to follow them.

“Revision” is when you review your writing to see whether it meets your objectives. Since virtually no one can write a successful research paper in one draft, writers go through the process of revision (usually through multiple drafts) until they are satisfied they have met their objectives. Your objectives are to join the scholarly conversation, have a clear purpose, a compelling case, and a research project that rewards your audience for their attention. As a student, you also need to meet the requirements of the assignment you’ve been given. Professional writers often give themselves assignments, which can mean they write for publications.

We discuss revisions in terms of content and form. In practice, content and form are inseparable. If your ideas (content) are not intelligible in your writing (form), your audience will not be able to engage with your ideas. You have to know what to say and the best way to say it.

Learning Objectives

Revision is where you make major changes to your ideas and the form in which they are expressed. It often involves rewriting whole sections, moving sentences and paragraphs around, and making sure all transitions are clear and logical. Writing guidelines are meant to help make your writing accessible and clear for readers. From the following pages you will learn

- how to contribute to the scholarly conversation
- how to convince your reader to adopt your argument as their own
- how to revise your work to meet your objectives

- how to write academic prose

Writer's Block

Writer's block is a term that describes an inability to write, especially when we have an important writing task to complete. The "block" means that some obstacle is standing between the writer and the task. Writer's block may be frustrating but it can be productive if you work through it. Overcoming writer's block strengthens your ability to solve problems and become a better writer. A block can be internal, such as psychological resistance. If so, find out why it's coming up. If it's external, it's an opportunity to change your circumstances or your priorities. If it's about the research project itself, it's an opportunity to address complexities or rethink the research problem or your approach.

Common obstacles and suggested ways to deal with them

1. **Bad writing (shapeless or meandering prose).** *Advice: find a scholar whose work you really admire.* Try to write in the style of that person or examine the structure of their work and see if you can structure yours in a similar way. For example, maybe the text you admire is structured as a comparison/contrast. See if that structure works for your project. Ask for feedback and advice from more advanced researchers and writers.
2. **Blocked access to research materials.** *Advice: prepare in advance so you are not without your research materials.* If you are working with digital materials, carry them with you on a storage device such as a flash drive or in cloud storage. If you need access to printed library materials, make sure you look them up in the online catalog first to see if they are available. Schedule a time to go to the library and scan/photograph shorter works or excerpts and store those on an electronic device or in cloud storage.
3. **Busyness.** *Advice: commit to a schedule.* Do your research and writing on a regular basis (like three times a week). Start the work session by setting a timer and work for 15 minutes without a break. When the time is up, see if you can keep going. Make sure you take an actual break and walk around at least once an hour. If there seems to be too many activities in your life that are overlapping (i.e. social gatherings and research time), buy a planner or use your phone's calendar with audio reminders to help you commit to your schedule. If all else fails, you may need to choose one activity over the other.
4. **Depression/Anxiety.** *Advice: prioritize self-care,* such as proper eating, sleep, and exercise. Let go of toxic relationships. Get help from professionals if needed. Think of writing as a meaningful activity that actually helps many people overcome their psychological pressures. If you need addi-

tional help from UCF, please visit CAPS (Counseling and Psychological Services).

5. **Distraction.** *Advice: shut down other things*, like video games, web browsers, music, and text messaging. If you care about your success as a student, you will prioritize your research over distractions.
6. **Exhaustion.** *Advice: pace yourself.* Don't expect to do a marathon at a sprint pace. You'll burn out.
7. **Family and work responsibilities.** *Advice: you may need to change your work schedule, find childcare, etc.* The realities of life can make being a successful researcher difficult. Make adjustments as you can.
8. **Fear of being wrong.** *Advice: do your research and writing in good faith* (by trying not to deceive yourself or others) and if you later discover you were wrong about something, you can produce another piece of writing explaining how your views evolved. We likely will be wrong in our writing from time to time.
9. **Fear of controversy.** *Advice: if your methods or argument are likely to be controversial, be prepared to defend and justify them in your writing.* If you can strongly defend these things, then controversy itself is not a sufficient reason to stop a research project.
10. **Getting started.** *Advice: put words on paper (or on screen).* Lots of people have difficulty taking the first step on a research project. Motivate yourself by using fun activities to reward yourself *after* you've done some research and writing. Starting is the most important thing, so don't worry if your first words on paper or screen are bad. Use accountability partners; take turns reading each other's work every few days.
11. **Getting stuck in the middle.** *Advice: make a list of tasks you need to do to finish.* Organize them by listing the most immediate tasks first. Make regular updates of your plan as you move through it. Try switching to a different research or writing project. Think about your various projects the way a chef does; some things are on the front burners and some things on the back burners. When one project needs to rest, put it on the back burner and work on something else.
12. **Language fluency.** *Advice: plan extra time for your work.* If you are reading and writing in a language that you don't feel fully fluent in, try writing your main ideas in your first language and then work on translating them.
13. **Negative self-talk.** *Advice: have other people support you.* The voices in our heads can tell us we're stupid, lazy, and all kinds of other nasty things. None of them are true. Find someone who will tell you the truth about your great qualities and your potential.
14. **Not in the mood.** *Advice: don't allow yourself to get too fussy about your environment.* Some people need a specific set of conditions to do their research and writing: a cup of coffee, a quiet room, and a soft cat. These are all fine, but the best way to get in the mood to write is to start writing.
15. **Other priorities.** *Advice: prioritize things by deadlines and that are most valuable to your career* (i.e. prioritize work on high value assignments). If other things are left unfinished temporarily, that's ok.
16. **Panic.** *Advice: plan far ahead and scheduling tasks on various projects.* If it gets to be close to the deadline and you still have too many projects due, prioritize the ones that are most important, take the loss (you'll probably have more opportunities in the future), and let go of the panic.
17. **Slow pace of writing.** *Advice: keep making progress.* Are you making measurable progress? Then you are doing well. Some research and writing tasks take longer than others. If you are stuck in the weeds (getting obsessive about details), go back to the big picture.
18. **Too much research.** *Advice: know when enough research is enough.* Researchers rarely have the luxury to gather all the available knowledge about a topic (a maximizing strategy called "cover-

age"). Sometimes researchers feel they must keep going until they understand what everyone has ever said about a topic. We have to accept that uncertainty is part of the process and make the project as good as we can (a strategy called "optimizing") or, if we need to move on, make it good enough (a strategy called "satisficing)."

19. **Uncertainty.** *Advice: approach complicated issues in your project systematically.* Sometimes writers are overwhelmed with the complexity of the task before them. Write down a list of the complications in your project and address them one at a time.
20. **"What I have so far is terrible!"** *Advice: take what you have and see how it can be better.* Then do it again. Research and writing are about improvement. Making steady improvements is a process called hill climbing. Eventually you will be high enough on the hill that you can see above the clouds. Judging your work as terrible is part of "Negative Self-Talk." Your project is probably not as bad as what your inner-voice is telling you. Don't think of what you have written as "terrible," focus on the *good* parts of your writing!

All writers want inspiration to strike them so hard that writing feels like sliding down a hill. The truth is that most good writing requires more perspiration than inspiration; inspiration occurs because we created the conditions for it with our perspiration. Keep at it. Inspiration may or may not come. Your writing will improve as you practice and learn.

For some tips on setting your mindset before writing, please see the following:

Writing Commons Links:

1. [Mindset](#)
2. [Growth Mindset](#)
3. [Faith in the Writing Process](#)
4. [The Believing Game](#)
5. [Why Write](#)
6. [Effective Writing Habits](#)
7. [Intellectual Openness](#)
8. [Demystify Writing Misconceptions](#)
9. [Self-Regulation & Metacognition](#)
10. [Establish a Comfortable Place to Write](#)
11. [Overcome Discouragement](#)
12. [Reflect on Your Writing Processes](#)
13. [Scheduling Writing](#)
14. [Resilience](#)

Structures

Your instructors know that writers face anxiety about writing, but they want to see your enthusiasm, not your anxiety, in your writing. They want to know what you think and how you reason. Here are some :

Tips for Structuring Your Writing

1. Consider your reader and make your prose reader-friendly. Writing is more than just a way to demonstrate your knowledge.
2. Address your research question explicitly by showing how you understand it. Explain how you interpret the research question and the significance/relevance of the research question before you move ahead into an argument or discussion.
3. Provide a brief overview of the rest of your response: what resources — conceptual, methodological — are you bringing to the research question? How will you proceed?
4. Define key terms before you begin a discourse about them. Even if you think your readers share an understanding of these terms, they want to see how you define them before moving ahead.
5. When citing, do not assume your readers understand the whole framework of the text. Give your reader an overview before proceeding. Treat the material dialectically, meaning that you show your reader how a “branch of knowledge” or a “school of thought” relates to other branches or schools, how the branch you are dealing with is divided, and how the various parts relate to each other. Be systematic, but also be critical, where appropriate.
6. State your thesis clearly. What is your position? Explain how you will back up your claim.
7. Present obvious counter-arguments to your claim clearly and refute them systematically using strong evidence and clear reasoning (see box below for addressing counter-arguments) Do not dismiss counter-arguments out of hand without first engaging them.
8. In your writing, alternate between the conceptual and the concrete (we discussed this practice in a previous chapter). In other words, when you discuss a concept, show us how it applies to a particular case. When you discuss a case, explain which concepts you use to make sense of it.
9. Explain the warrants — logical connections — as you move your reader from thought to thought or from claim to claim. Make sure your readers can follow your connections and that they make sense logically.
10. Avoid common stylistic errors such as the use of vague pronouns (“it” and “this” are the usual suspects), passive voice sentences that hide agency, and common punctuation problems such as comma splices

Presenting Counter Arguments

You should assume your audience will look with skepticism at your thesis. They will be considering alternative claims and will be looking for weaknesses in your argu-

ment. You should, therefore, address the reader's questions and concerns clearly and directly by putting yourself in the reader's shoes, imagining these possible questions and concerns, and addressing them one by one.

One approach is to present counter-arguments other critics have made and then contrast the weaknesses in their arguments to the strengths in yours. Sometimes you may not be able to find counter-arguments to your thesis in other publications. In that case, you should imagine possible objections to your arguments and state them clearly in your paper before refuting them with evidence and persuasive reasoning.

This process of argument/counter-argument is what you would expect in a courtroom trial where a prosecutor and defense attorney take turns building up their own arguments and tearing down arguments from the opposing side. In most academic papers, your tone will be civil. In general, there is no need to berate a scholar who happens to be wrong. The 16th-century astronomer Tycho Brahe believed that the sun orbited the Earth. It doesn't help your case to write, "Tycho Brahe! What a loser!" Instead, you should explain why Brahe believed what he did and then explain that he was lacking the information or the perspective that you have now.

Basic Structure of Academic Writing

The structure described below is a bare-bones, basic framework for college writing. You are not locked into it (unless your instructor says so) and there are many other structures, but this one will do for most research papers.

Basic Structure of Academic Writing

1. Title

- Reference your thesis statement, theory, method, or topic; name the author and title of the work being analyzed.
- Example: The Downfall of the Southern Gentry: A Marxist Reading of Faulkner's "Barn Burning."

2. Introduction *(usually one paragraph)*

- Attention-getting opener: problem, anecdote, question, quote, analogy, definition, or example
- Narrowing of general topic
- Research question
- Thesis:
 - Clarifies specific topic, purpose, and focus (your particular point or perspective about topic)
 - Does not “announce” these things (“In this paper I will”) but explains why the claim is significant or necessary.
 - Usually the last sentence of introduction paragraph
 - The rest of the paper supports and explains the claim made in the thesis

3. Body

- In your transition from the thesis statement to the body (main part) of the essay, you lead the reader through your argument and its relevance. Avoid the temptation to merely summarize a literary work. You may, if you choose, present a preview of your argument while summarizing the literary work along the way.
- Topic sentence: each paragraph has a topic sentence that states the main idea of the paragraph
- Support:
 - Reasons/Explanations: show your reader the evidence and reasoning that supports each claim
 - Evidence includes direct quotations from the text; try to avoid long quotes by paraphrasing or by breaking them into smaller parts.
 - Never include a quotation without framing it within your argument. Introduce the quote, then present the quote, then comment on it.
 - Climactic order: your best or most significant idea should be discussed in your last body paragraph

4. Conclusion *(usually one paragraph)*

- Reaffirm thesis: don't use exactly the same sentence, but remind reader of the main idea
- Finish with a broad point or generalization, a suggestion for further research, or a rhetorical question
- Don't bring up new ideas or points regarding your thesis in your conclusion; all support should stay in the body of the essay.

Wendy Belcher's *Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks* provides excellent advice for structuring your research paper:

"Structure is the organization of your argument and the evidence for your argument. When each part of your article leads logically to the next part, you have a coherent structure" (172). Structures allow your reader to make logical connections as they move through your ideas. They also help you, as you are writing, to connect your ideas into a greater whole.

Belcher identifies two types of structure: micro (paragraph level) and macro (paper level):

Micro-Structure (Paragraph Level)

1. **Description:** provides information about a topic and answers who, what, where, and when. Includes "for example," "such as," and "that is."
2. **Sequence:** chronological or procedural information such as background, histories, and experiments. Includes: "before," "after," and "more recently."
3. **Causation:** cause and effect relationships. Includes "because," "thus," and "therefore."
4. **Problem/solution:** asks and answers questions. Includes "argues that," "proposes," and "responds."
5. **Comparison:** differences and similarities. Includes "in contrast," "instead," and "on the other hand" (173).

Macro-Structure (Project Level)

In general terms, you should start with an introduction that focuses the reader's attention, then provide background, propose your argument, provide evidence, confront counter-arguments, and state a conclusion. Most undergraduate essays follow the structure of topic, thesis, evidence, and conclusion. More specifically, you introduce the problem, discuss critical approaches, apply the approach, speculate on implications, and conclude (Belcher, 180).

Two millennia ago, Roman scholars Cicero and Quintilian developed the six-part structure of argumentative presentation that we use to this day.

1. **Introduction (*exordium*).** The beginning in which you give your main argument and relevant

information.

2. **Statement of the case**(*narratio*). Discuss the facts and qualities of the case. For a paper on literary studies, the “case” is the literary work you are examining.
3. **Outline of the major points in the argument** (*divisio* or *partitio*). Present the disputed issues and list the arguments in the order you will present them.
4. **Proof of the case** (*confirmatio*). Validate the statements in the *narratio* and *divisio*.
5. **Refutation of possible opposing arguments** (*confutatio*). Anticipate disagreements and refute them.
6. **Conclusion** (*peroratio*). Sum up your arguments.

Structure helps your reader stay connected to the flow of your ideas. Belcher offers the following advice for organizing your ideas in a reader-friendly way:

Principles of Organization

1. “Go from what your readers know to what they don’t know. That is, start with the familiar.”
2. “Go from the simple to the complex. Get your reader comfortable before introducing the difficult.”
3. “Go from the uncontested to the more contested. Readers who have been convinced to believe one thing may be more easily believe the next.”
4. “Go from the general to the particular. Start with the large picture and then focus on the details.”
5. “Go chronologically from the past to the present (This common structure is not always the best one for your particular argument and evidence).”
6. “Go spatially through a succession of linked objects, as if on a guided tour. This works particularly well for art history, geography, and so on.” (Belcher, 174)

Solving Structural Problems

To maintain your paper’s coherence, connect every sentence to the next sentence. The same is true of paragraphs (182). Below are additional strategies you should use to organize your paper.

1. **Use Subheads:** Subheads help the author and the reader to group information (182-183).

2. **Use Summary:** Peter Elbow writes, “Good summaries move the article forward by articulating what has been said and what will be said. Good summaries are not simplistic, verbatim restatements” (183).
3. **Organize around your argument:** Relate all particulars (evidence and proofs) to your argument.
4. **Stay on topic.** Don’t digress. Ask yourself whether each particular claim is relevant to your main argument (184).
5. **Develop examples evenly:** Develop all of your sections equally. Don’t treat one part of your argument at length and another with a brief statement (185)
6. **Do not use a discovery structure:** Structure your presentation based on evidence (not on your discovery process). Organize notes in the data collection stage around themes and topics. Your structure will emerge from these themes and topics (183).
7. **Do not use the “mystery novel” structure :** State your argument up front. Tell people where you are going, then lead them through your evidence (183).

Revisions

A *revision* is a rethinking and reorganizing of your research paper at a macro level. Revisions are different from *proofreading*, in which you clean up smaller things like any errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

A revisions involves a big picture review of two things

- Your content
- Your form

Content

Content refers to your

Elements of Research Contents

- topic
- research question
- thesis statement
- theory
- method
- major supporting arguments

Reread your work and determine whether you made the best choices in each of these categories. Gather feedback from others, especially experts in the discipline. Sometimes revision leads to a total rethinking of the research project with a new topic and research question. No matter how far down the wrong road you go, it's always a good idea to turn around.

Form

Form refers to the chosen structure of your paper, the order of presentation, logical connections, use of examples, etc.

Researchers typically organize their presentation using one or more of the *modes* of writing. These modes include

Writing Modes

- Cause and effect
- Process analysis
- Case study
- Comparison/contrast
- Classification and division
- Definition
- Analysis
- Argumentation
- Narrative
- Description

If sections of your writing seem disorganized, try using one of these modes to help get your ideas into shape. To learn more about modes, visit [Modes of Writing](#) by Jonna Schwartz.

During revision, consider whether you need to move paragraphs, add or remove examples, eliminate redundancies, provide transitions between paragraphs, strengthen your conclusion, etc.

Professional writers often go through many revisions before they are ready to submit their work for publication. Publishers then review the work and may accept it as is, reject it, or accept with revisions. *Accept with revisions* is a common outcome; the publisher will specify what needs to be revised, with the understanding that the paper will be published if the requested changes are made.

Harvard Link:

1. [Revising the Draft](#)

Writing Commons Links:

1. [Revision](#)
2. [Revise for Substantive Prose](#)

Writing Academic Prose

We discuss the following key subjects on this page:

- [Writing Guidelines](#)
- [The Craft of Writing](#)
- [The Word “I”](#)

Writing Guidelines

Writing guidelines are standards for achieving consistency, clarity, and precision in your writing, which enables readers to better appreciate your ideas.

Your reader should not have to struggle with prose that is confusing, wordy, vague, or poorly structured. Use these guidelines to keep your writing strong and reader-friendly.

Writing Guidelines

- Use active voice sentences and avoid passive voice sentences. Active voice sentences have people doing things. They place the subject first and then the verb.
 - “F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*,” is an example of an active voice sentence; “F. Scott Fitzgerald” is the subject and “wrote” is the verb.
 - “*The Great Gatsby* was written by F. Scott Fitzgerald” is an example of a passive voice sentence.

Active voice sentences engage the reader. The subject and verb are closer together, which strengthens the logical connection between them. Passive voice sentences typically lead to wordiness. In the examples above, the passive voice sentence contains two extra words. Your sentences should be no longer than necessary to convey the required information; we don’t want readers to work more than necessary. Passive voice sentences are appropriate when the focus is on the object of the sentence. For example, we could say that a literary work “was released as a special edition.” In this example, we are not concerned with *who* released the special edition (which would be the subject of the sentence), but only *that* it was released.

The most problematic passive voice sentences are those in which a subject is expected but is absent. For example, “*The Great Gatsby* was written” is a complete sentence but is inappropriate for a scholarly paper.

- **Use logical connecting words** to make the relationships of ideas clear to your reader. Logical connecting words include “because,” “since,” “therefore,” “although,” “however,” “thus,” “if . . . then,” “both . . . and,” “neither . . . nor,” and “from . . . to.”
-

- **Avoid vague expletives (“It is,” “There are”).** Such constructions create murky prose and make your reader work harder than necessary to understand your claims. Additionally, such constructions, usually placed at the beginning of sentences, lead to lengthy and weak sentences. Instead, start with the subject of the sentence (the person or thing doing the action) followed by an active verb.
 - Don’t write: “It is obvious that there are many ways in which Zora Neal Hurston’s childhood impacted her writing.”
 - Instead: “Zora Neal Hurston’s childhood impacted her writing in many ways.”
-

- **Replace “to be” verbs (*is, are, was, were, be, will be, etc.*) with active verbs.**
 - Don’t write: “It is important to know that there is a lot of interest in this text from scholars.”
 - Instead: “Scholars show significant interest in this text.”
-

- **Avoid strings of prepositional phrases.**
 - Don’t write: “*In light of evidence from the end of the eighteenth century about the process of printing, an improvement in technological means was occurring.*”
 - Instead: “Printing technology improved near the end of the eighteenth century.”
-

- **Do not use “this” or “which” to refer to the complete sense of a preceding sentence or clause.** “This” and “which” are adjectives, not pronouns. Using them as pronouns causes imprecision.
 - Don’t write: “Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* about a group of fictional characters, focusing on a millionaire (Gatsby) and his obsession with Daisy Buchanan in the Jazz Age.”

This (???) makes for a great meditation on the American Dream.”

- Instead: Follow “this” or “which” with a specific noun as in “This *novel* makes for a great meditation on the American Dream.”

- **In American scholarship, periods and commas *always* go inside end quotation marks.**

- Don’t write: “Fitzgerald also wrote ‘The Curious Case of Benjamin Button’”.
- Instead: “Fitzgerald also wrote ‘The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.’”

Colons and semicolons go outside end quotation marks, unless they are part of the quotation.

- **Do not use “their” when you mean “there” or “they’re.”** Homonyms are words with the same sound but different spellings and meanings.

-
- **Know when to put titles in quotation marks or italics.** Titles of essays, short stories, songs, and shorter poems go in quotation marks. Italicize the following: very long poems, book titles, movie titles, television series, comic strips, record album titles, magazines, and newspapers. Do not put your own paper title in quotation marks. If your paper title includes the title of another work, such as *The Great Gatsby*, be sure to italicize or use quotation marks, using the guidelines above.

- **When referring to people, do not use the pronoun “that” when you mean “who.”**

- Don’t write: “People that live in glass houses should not throw stones.”
- Instead: “People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.”

-
- **Avoid comma splices.** A comma splice joins two independent clauses (each of which can stand as a separate sentence), unconnected by a conjunction, with a comma.
 - Don’t write: “Gatsby is a man given to obsession, he thinks about Daisy without stop.”
 - Instead: replace the comma with either a semi-colon or a period, or you may simply add a conjunction (such as the word “and”) after the comma. “Gatsby is a man given to obsession; he thinks about Daisy without stop.”
-

- **Avoid dangling modifiers.** Modifiers, usually at the beginning of a sentence, must relate to the subject of the sentence or they will dangle.
 - Don't write: "Expecting an important call, the telephone was always at Gatsby's side." Telephones don't "expect."
 - Instead: "Expecting an important call, Gatsby stayed close to the telephone."
-
- **Sentence elements that are parallel in function should be parallel in grammatical form.**
 - Don't write: "Gatsby liked to play and winning." (Mixes an infinitive, "to play" and a present participle, "winning.")
 - Instead: "Gatsby liked playing and winning" or "Gatsby liked to play and win."
-
- **Substitute familiar for unfamiliar or archaic words.**
 - Don't write: "Gatsby was not fully cognizant of the dangers."
 - Instead: "Gatsby was not fully aware of the dangers."

Scholars should aim to write without reproducing sexist language and stereotypes. See this [Guide to nonsexist language](#) from the University of Arizona.

A collection of handouts about revising your prose can be found in the link below

[The Paramedic Method](#)¹

1. Includes overviews of the following: The "Paramedic Method" Modified from Lanham, R (2007). *Revising Prose*, 5th ed, Five Characteristics of Academic and Bureaucratic Prose Adapted from *Technical Editing for Scientists*, Bruce Jaffee <http://jaffeerevises.com/index.htm>, Guidelines for Revising Scientific and Technical Prose (modified from materials at The Center for Communication Practices at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Phil Druker's University of Idaho class and IY Hashimoto's Whitman College Writing Center)

The Craft of Writing

The basic skills involved in the craft of scholarly writing are to:

1. Anticipate the reader's need for information, explanation, and context
2. Use logical connections between ideas
3. Use appropriate, clear, and smooth transitions
4. Use sophisticated sentences, appropriate word choice, and professional conventions of written English

The reader should be able to follow your writing without having to ask unnecessary questions about the meaning of a specialized term, the relation of ideas to one another, the identity of a character in a literary work, etc.

A reader should not have to struggle through prose that is vague or has weak sentence structure. No reader wants to confront technical errors such as poor grammar, misspellings, or misuse of punctuation. The best way to write for your reader is to imagine yourself in your reader's position and anticipate the reader's need for information. In other words, ask yourself questions while you read your work and try to answer them all. Ask other people to read your work and to indicate where they have unanswered questions. Then answer these questions in your writing.

The Word "I"

In literary research papers, there is no hard rule against using the word *I* unless your instructor makes it a rule. But *I* is usually unnecessary. You don't need to write "I think" because your reader knows your words are your thoughts.

You don't need to tell us the story of your research process unless doing so is particularly relevant. For instance, if you struggled to obtain a document, and that story is worth telling, you can explain what happened using *I*. It is better to use the word *I* if avoiding it would make your prose awkward. For example, if you are describing your own experience with a text (ex.: "I first read *The Great Gatsby* in high school"), writing "One first read *The Great Gatsby* in high school" is not going to work.

Exercises

Go to Quizzes and take the Writing Guidelines quiz.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: AVOIDING PLAGIARISM / ADDITIONAL RESOURCES / FOUNDATIONAL MATERIALS ASSIGNMENT

Avoiding Plagiarism

Scholars keep track of their references as a way to build upon and give credit to other scholars. The trail of references from one scholar to another are like breadcrumbs that researchers can follow to find their path back through a scholarly discourse. By citing others, we are respecting their work and the tradition that keeps the trail of breadcrumbs legible so others can follow it after us.

Plagiarism is not just a theft of someone else's ideas or words, but is also a violation of the code that scholars and researchers live by. Without a clear picture of where ideas and scholarly language comes from, we lose our trail.

Wendy Belcher, in her book *Writing Your Journal Article in Twelve Weeks: A Guide to Academic Publishing Success*, provides advice for avoiding plagiarism. First, she notes that you will be caught. Especially with the digital search tools available today, checking for plagiarism has become fast and easy. And the penalties can be severe. Plagiarism has cost scholars their reputations and livelihoods. It's just not worth it! To avoid plagiarism

To Avoid Plagiarism, Do Not

- Present someone else's entire work as your own
- Change little bits and call it your own
- Reword it and call it your own
- Translate it and call it your own
- Take sections or paragraphs and call it your own
- Use word-for-word quotes unless you put them in quotation marks and properly cite them (161).

Additionally, be careful when paraphrasing that your wording is too close. If you are having a hard time paraphrasing, it is better to use direct quotes instead of paraphrasing (161).

Finally, don't re-use your own work without acknowledging it. Self-plagiarism, in

which scholars re-use direct language from other works they've published or submitted for credit, is also wrong.

It is always fine to cite other scholars in your work. Scholars do it all the time. But you must give proper credit.

There are several resources available via the UCF Libraries and Writing Center to help you avoid plagiarism

Writing Center Handout: This [quick-reference guide](#) distinguishes between plagiarism and the misuse of sources as well as what types of materials require citations, the basics of quoting, paraphrasing, and more. Also see [this handout on quoting and paraphrasing](#).

Video Tutorial: The following videos were created as part of the UCF Libraries' [Research Tips Thursdays](#) webinars, a weekly series designed to help students develop their research skills. The videos featured here focus on skills that every researcher needs to now: When to quote others, how to paraphrase, and why we cite.

Let's begin with To Quote Or Not To Quote:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=201#oembed-1>

Use Your Words: Paraphrasing Made Easy:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=201#oembed-2>

Why We Cite:



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.online.ucf.edu/strategies/?p=201#oembed-3>

Avoiding Plagiarism Modules: [These modules](#) cover [Avoiding Plagiarism and Citing Sources](#) in both MLA and APA styles. They're a good way to test your knowledge once you've read the above handouts and watched the video.

If, after exhausting these resources, you need additional help or clarification about plagiarism, please make an appointment with the [Writing Center](#) or consult with your instructor.

Exercise

Go to the Quizzes area and take the Plagiarism Quiz.

Additional Resources

University Writing Center

The Writing Center is guided by six valued principles—respect, compassion, diversity, adaptability, collaboration, and learning—with the purpose of:

- providing members of the UCF community free individual and group peer consultations at any stage of the writing process.
- serving as a campus resource for the ongoing cross-disciplinary learning about writing through events and workshops.
- promoting the growth of peer tutors with a rich teaching and learning experience and ongoing professional development in writing center research, theory, and practice to encourage them as leaders, scholars, and teachers.

Visit the [Writing Center](#)!

Information Literacy Modules

Test your knowledge of many of the topics we have covered in this course including avoiding plagiarism, citing sources, creating a search strategy, and conducting a literature review with the UCF Libraries' [Information Literacy Modules](#).

Research Tips Thursdays

Research Tips Thursdays is a webinar series created by the UCF Libraries one Thursday each month. Some of the early videos are longer on length (30-40 minutes) but the more recent ones are short (2-3:00 minutes) and focus on specific skills that all researchers need to know. Topics include evaluating resources, the research process, search strategies, and tips for success. See the [RTT website](#) for more information.

Undergraduate Research Opportunities

[The Office of Undergraduate Research](#) offers a plethora of useful information for undergraduates including research opportunities, funding sources, publishing and presenting opportunities, resources for getting started with research and training to further develop your skills.

Showcase of Undergraduate Research

[The Showcase of Undergraduate Research Excellence](#) (SURE) is a poster forum for UCF undergraduates to present their research and creative projects to the broader university community. Undergraduates from all disciplines are encouraged to present current or recently completed academic projects showcasing the diversity of topics, approaches, and interests at UCF. This is an excellent opportunity to showcase your work among the best undergraduate researchers at UCF. You can showcase your research in a poster session first, then as an article for the Pegasus Review.

The Pegasus Review

Even as an undergrad, publishing your research is a real opportunity and is especially worth considering if you're planning to go to grad school. [The Pegasus Review](#) is UCF's journal of undergraduate research and they're always on the lookout for high-quality student work, especially from the humanities. If you're interested in publishing your research, consult their [submissions guidelines](#) and review their [archive of back issues](#).

UCF Funding Opportunities

Interested in opportunities to have your research funded? Visit the [UCF Funding Opportunities](#) page to learn more.

Publishing and Conferences

Humanities venues are always looking for new research, and students can start their careers through these avenues. You can find CFPs (Call For Papers) in the following:

- UPenn <https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/>
- HNet <https://networks.h-net.org/subject-fields/humanities>
- WikiCFP <http://www.wikicfp.com/cfp/call?conference=humanities>

Exercises

- How much of the material in Strategies for Conducting Inquiry-Based Literary Research was new to you? How much did you already know? Did the course help you build upon what you knew?
- Do you have a better understanding of literary research as a discipline after working through the course? Does your work with the course help you with other humanities research outside of literary studies (could include theater, visual arts, music, languages, history, etc.)? Explain.
- Have you been able to adapt and apply skills, abilities, theories, or methodologies gained in this course to new situations and/or to solve difficult problems or explore complex issues in original ways? Explain.
- Have you been better able to formulate and present your ideas and your research in coursework as a result of working through the chapters in this course? Explain.
- Envision a future self using what you have learned in this course. What do you see yourself doing? Are you using these lessons in your future career? What plans do you have and how do the lessons you learned here help you realize them?

Write your answers in a webcourse discussion page.



Go to the Discussion area and find the Reflection Self-Assessment discussion. Participate in the discussion.

Foundational Materials Assignment

Turn in your proposed title, research question, thesis statement, abstract, and annotated list of sources for your final research project. This assignment is a major step on your way to the research project.

Your Foundational Materials work may only end up being a couple of pages long, but we are going for quality not quantity here. You will use this material as the basis for your research project. Not all of these elements necessarily appear in your final research project, however. Some research projects do not require abstracts or annotated bibliographies, for example, but these elements are useful to you as you put together your research project.

This foundational material project is intended to give you a template for your final research project. Completing this foundational work requires adequate time and attention, and a clear idea of how to complete the assignment's demands. It is ok to revise it as you are working on the research project; scholars do this all the time. But we must begin with an assessment of audience and purpose, a provisional "problem," research question, thesis, and overview of an argument. We must have some sense of the existing scholarly discussion on a topic for any chance of our contribution to have relevance.

Most important is to develop the contents of the paper – your arguments, use of sources, etc. Your arguments need specificity, strength, support, and coherence. As one of my former professors used to say, writing arguments is not "natural" and is extremely difficult to learn. But the power of arguments is immense and worth the effort. Professional scholars sometimes rework their argument dozens of times before they are happy with it. Most of the time we cannot create a strong, coherent argument in one or two drafts.

Please ask for your instructor's feedback or help if you need it before turning in this assignment. They are here to help you (it's literally their job!).

Further instructions are below.

1. Be sure to indicate which **prompt** from the project assignments you are referring to. By choosing one, you are choosing the “frame” for your work. Make sure you incorporate **key terms** in your proposal. If your research is about metaphor in a literary work, you need to explain which metaphor(s) in particular you are addressing. It shouldn’t be about metaphor in general.
2. The **parts of the assignment**, such as composing a title, developing a research question, writing a thesis statement, and so on, are explained in our course units. Following the advice in these units will help you stay away from many common yet avoidable mistakes.
3. **Titles:** If a key word appears in your title, it needs to appear somewhere else in your proposal. The title should indicate which **text** is your object of study. It should also indicate which theory, methodology, or method you are using to discuss the work. Your title needs to give the reader some guidance on what to expect in the paper. Imagine that your title is listed among twenty other titles in a journal – how will readers know which text you are discussing? Which theory or perspective you are taking? You should capitalize all words in your title except for prepositions (unless a preposition is at the beginning of the title, in which case you capitalize it). Your own title does not go in quotation marks. It is a mistake to imply that a particular writer is using a theory in their writing (as in this made-up example: “Judith Williamson’s Myth Structure in Poe’s ‘The Masque of the Red Death’.” The word “in” here implies that Williamson’s theory is in the story itself. Instead, you could say you are doing a reading of the story using Williamson’s theory.
4. **Research questions:** The assignment prompt is not the same thing as your research question about the text you are studying. What is it you want to know about this text? Don’t make your research question too broad. To avoid writing a paper that makes little contact with evidence, make your research question about a specific text and specific things (such as particular metaphors or paradoxes, etc.) in the text. The question should be answerable with an arguable claim. Make sure your research question is relevant to your audience (of textual scholars). What do you want to know that isn’t answered adequately by available studies? Why should the question you raise matter to others? Don’t ask whether we can apply a theory to a text. I’m sure we could apply almost any theory to almost any text, but what is it you want to know about the text? Is there something specific about it that can’t be understood by other means?
5. **Thesis statement:** Writing a good thesis statement is one of the most difficult

tasks in academic writing. Your thesis statement should be an answer to your research question. It needs to be about a specific text or texts, rather than about a topic (like paradox) in general. Because you are stating an arguable claim, you should do more than claim you will discuss or analyze a text (these terms imply an explicatory paper, which is “about” something, and not an argumentative one that makes a claim). Avoid making vague claims that we can “understand” a text. Tell your reader the text’s meaning. Avoid making claims that are already known or generally accepted, such as that Ernest Gaines’ writing is about injustice. Tell us what actions are unjust and explain why. Avoid vague language. Stating that something is “different” or “unique” is not an arguable claim. Don’t claim that a text is an “example” of a theory. Most theories are general enough to cover a potentially infinite number of examples. Tell us what is special about a text and why it matters. Don’t claim to prove that a theory (like Cleanth Brooks’ theory of paradox) is true. Many literary theories are fairly well accepted; you can add research showing how other theorists have amended and extended their work. The theory should tell us something about a text that we can’t learn another way. Don’t claim that Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory shows us that Gaines’ work is about race because we already know that without help from the theory. Instead tell us how Gaines’ text represents discourses of race, how these discourses conflict, how a character navigates them, and so on. Keep your thesis statement as short as possible and put longer explanations in the abstract.

6. **Abstract:** Explain how your research contributes to the scholarly conversation. Your abstract should explain the argument in more detail and provide an idea of what support you are using and why your claim is significant.
7. **Annotated bibliography:** How you are positioning your argument in relation to that of other scholars? Which ones do you agree with or disagree with? Of the ones that agree, how will your work differ from theirs? Are you deviating from other scholarship in some ways? Building upon it? Providing meta-commentary on it? Which sources are you using for evidence? How does your work contribute to the scholarly discussion? If your proposal refers to a theory or method, include something in the bibliography about it. Sometimes one source you found will be closest to the paper you are writing. You can use it as your primary jumping off point – how does your work differ or supplement this work? Each work listed in your bibliography should have a full citation. Make sure your citations are properly formatted (MLA, APA, etc.).

8. **Stylistics:** Keep proposals in present tense (unless it's specifically about the future or the past). In other words, avoid writing "this paper will . . ." Avoid passive voice sentences, especially agentless ones that don't tell us who is doing what. Make sure your arguments are strong and clear and that there are few or no mechanical or style problems to slow down your reader. Your reader wants to learn and enjoy – they do not want to struggle to figure out what you mean, how your ideas are connected, or to confront style problems. Writers work harder so that their readers don't have to. Short story titles go in quotation marks and book titles go in italics. Avoid using "this" as a stand-alone pronoun, which leads to vagueness.

If your project uses a theory outside of its normal application, then explain why it is doing so and how you are making it work. For instance, Vladimir Propp's morphological theory is about folktales. If you are applying it to a modernist literary work, explain why Propp's theory is relevant outside of folktales. Your reader may think, for example, that modernist works don't follow the narrative structures of folktales and that applying Propp to one will just tell us what we already believe – that folktales and modernist literary works are different. But if applying Propp to a modernist literary work reveals something about that work we could not have understood otherwise, then by all means, use it!

Research projects take time to prepare and write. Be sure to schedule time regularly each week to do this work. Start with something very manageable like 15 minutes a day, and then if you go over that time it's a bonus. The hardest part is starting.

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense that can lead to expulsion from the university. You must properly cite your sources, using quotation marks (or offsetting longer quotes) and providing proper citation.

Glossary

analysis

examination of the elements or structure of something.

arguments

reasons given to persuade others that a belief or action is right or wrong.

counterclaims

arguments that could be raised against yours

criteria

a standard by which something may be judged.

critical race theory

Investigates racial disparities embedded in political, economic, legal, and social systems.

disinterestedness

They are not invested in a particular outcome and stand to gain or lose nothing by taking a side in a dispute.

ethos

The character of a speaker or rhetor.

Monograph

A monograph is a specialist work of writing or exhibition on a single subject or an aspect of a subject, often by a single author or artist, and usually on a scholarly subject. For more information, visit: [Wikipedia](#)

Positing

assume as a fact; put forward as a basis of argument.

Definition from Oxford Languages