

# ENG 1213: Argumentation

## How to Research

### 1. Identify your subject.

In some writing situations, the teacher will give you a specific topic or subject to work on. In other writing situations, you may have to find a subject yourself. Generally, try to pick ones that you have some knowledge of before research. This will make your task easier in many ways because you won't be entering the project cold.

### 2. Ask a research question.

You have to narrow the subject and choose a position from which to argue. Pinpoint the areas you are most interested in and ask a question about those areas. For a paper, I might be curious about the phrase "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" from the Declaration of Independence. Does our government still support those ideals? See, there's a question. But it is probably too broad. I can narrow it further by brainstorming. I would want to define what our Founding Fathers (FF) meant by life, liberty, and happiness. These terms can have vastly different interpretations. For example, I might think that the three could involve freedom to choose in areas like euthanasia, abortion, wearing seatbelts/helmets. However, I cannot assume that the FF would lump them under the same heading. If I cannot find any evidence that the FF addressed these issues or others similar to them so that I might make a logical extrapolation, then I must look at the evidence I do have. What did they say about personal liberty versus government control in general? I can analyze this evidence and apply it to situations occurring today that did not occur then. I doubt strongly that abortion was a hot topic (though it happened). Nor can we expect tracts on seatbelts or helmets (obviously). But the issues surrounding these specific topics may be present in other cases.

Once I have a question in mind and a plan begun, I need to find sources to support my argument (or at least what I think is my argument at this point).

### 3. Begin researching sources.

**Definition: Academic Source** – any research you bring to a paper that is credible and verifiable, relying on objective, scholarly methods of problem solving, not personal, biased methods. **Synonym: credible source.**

You will find 2 types of sources. The first is primary. For the topic I listed above, the primary sources are the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution (including Bill of Rights). We call these primary because they are the beginning texts. Secondary sources, the second type, are things written about primary sources. Let me give you an analogy. If I quote President Bush, then I am using a primary source (going right to the horse's mouth). If I quote someone discussing or analyzing what President Bush said, I am using a secondary source. Both are important, and in research papers, you will need to use both to show you have looked at the different arguments surrounding your particular question.

Sometimes, your teacher will give you a data set of articles to work with. In this case, you will not need to perform outside research.

However, using secondary sources does not mean letting go of your own ideas. You must have a personal argument and be able to express that and prove it. The secondary sources merely help you prove it. They should never replace your own voice and narrative in the paper. This would mean you have 3-4 pages of quotes and summaries strung together by a few of your own sentences. If you begin researching before formulating a strong question and points to argue, then you

are more likely to lose control of your paper. BAD!!! I want to read what your ideas are and see that you have been able to find corroborating evidence. This is important because the reader might disagree or doubt your point, but if he/she sees evidence that supports it, the reader will be more inclined to give you benefit of the doubt. In argument, you must provide reasonable, verifiable evidence to back up your points. If you don't, then you will have failed in your purpose. Imagine a lawyer not presenting any evidence in a court case or any data that challenges evidence against her client. If she merely stands before the jury and says, "My client is innocent because he's a good person," how likely is it the jury will be convinced? Even if she says, "My client is innocent because he was sitting in a donut shop in Hoboken at the time of the crime" but doesn't provide witnesses or anything to verify that, the jury will not put much weight to the statement.

But it's not just about providing evidence. You have to provide credible evidence. We must be able to verify and trust the information you provide. If the lawyer has the client's mother swear he was with her all night but a policeman with no connection to the accused says he saw him running down the street a block from the crime, who are we more likely to believe? More than likely, the jury would believe the cop because he/she has no reason to lie (that we are aware of). The family and loved ones of defendants are usually weak witnesses because we think they would lie. The same is true of a witness with a criminal past who has made a deal. So consider your source!

#### 4. *Where do I find sources?*

The first place to look for the most current sources is the periodical index in the library. This lists by year all the articles published in magazines and newspapers, organized by topic. Once you find some articles, you will need to check the library's holding list to find out what magazines and newspapers it subscribes to and the years that it has. For example, SSC might have subscribed to Newsweek from 1952-1987, stopped carrying it for 5 years, and then resubscribed in 1992. If your article is from June 1990, then you're out of luck at SSC.

You can also go to the Internet and use <http://search.ebsco.org>. This is an online search engine of academic sources. Some of the articles you find will be available online; others you will have to find in hardcopy. You can choose the databases to search, narrowing to medical, educational, children, or other fields.

You should also check out the books SSC has on your topic. For a paper on the FF, I'm sure the library has many relevant books (including biographies of the main FF – especially Jefferson and Madison who were the primary authors of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, respectively). Consider the publication date of the book before using the data. Is it out of date?

The reference section of the library contains sources that you cannot check out, but do not overlook it. The ref section is rich with interesting sources that may be important to your argument. These books will be listed in the library's database.

Don't overlook field research. You can conduct your own surveys, experiments, and interviews. The Troyka gives you tips on some of these things. You can find other sources to help you set up special experiments and surveys. You can conduct interviews in person, over the phone, or via email. If you can't find someone around here that really qualifies as an expert, then you can go to the

**5. Internet Sources can be dangerous.**

Internet and find a specialist. Usually, people are willing to answer questions concerning their field. Don't overlook the authors of books or articles that you've found. Try doing a name search on the Internet. You might come up with a home page or email address for that person.

**6. Take precise notes during research**

The Internet is a wonderful tool, but it also contains a lot of junk. If you cannot establish the credentials of the source or verify the information, then it's usually best not to use the source. The rule of thumb for most information is that if you can find it in three other sources, then it is likely to be true. Now, if these sources are all fifty years out of date, then it doesn't matter how many you find. You have to use the most current information possible from the most respectable people/institutions. That still doesn't mean you won't find a dud, but it lowers your chances. The Internet is also a place where cut and paste abounds. By that, I mean many pages merely duplicate information found on another page. When you find three sources that contain the same information, be sure that they are not merely copying info. The rule of three sources means that three entities have independently verified the information.

When you find helpful information, make a note of it, including the complete bibliographical information (author, title, publisher, date, page number). You can use note cards or any means that you prefer as long as it's easy to organize. Don't rely on memory because memory will let you down. If the information is a direct quote from the source, put it in quotation marks, so you won't mistake it for your own words. This will prevent you from accidentally plagiarizing. You may also want to make some comments about the context of the information. One of the worst things you can do is to take a quote or information out of context and thus misconstrue the meaning. If I quote an obscure doctor on the efficacy of opium to control epileptic seizures but fail to let my readers know this doctor lived in 1665, then they will assume I am referring to a current physician. See the problem? I might want to prove this theory, but I cannot use deception to do so – this is a fallacy (card stacking).

**7. Be prepared to do a lot of reading.**

To find even a handful of credible sources, you may have to read twenty books or articles. You must start early so you don't run out of time. You may also find that the library does not carry some sources that are crucial to your paper. You will have to interlibrary loan them or go to a library that does have them. You may also find that someone has defaced the book or magazine, and the article you need is not there, or that someone has checked it out. Waiting till the last minute is dangerous because you will not have time to find replacement sources.

As for reading, generally researchers do not read everything they find. We learn to skim the article, index, table of contents, and chapters to determine the relevance of the source to our argument. If we think it could be a usable source, we put that in our "keep" pile and move on to the next potential source on our list. Once we've accumulated a good number of items in our keep pile, we sit down and look at them more closely. For books, you don't necessarily ever have to read the entire thing. Sometimes, only one or two chapters will be important to your argument. You should always at least skim the first and last chapters (or introduction chapter), because these usually give the book's "big picture." Prefaces will sometimes do this, but they are often more dedicatory in nature. For articles, try reading the first and last paragraph and the first sentences of each paragraph in between to get a good idea of the article's content. This will save

**8. Never forget your purpose.**

you much time and allow you to go through a large pile pretty quickly.

It's easy to get sidetracked when researching or to even lose focus. If you have to, write down your research question on a note card and keep that handy. Reread it occasionally to keep your mind on target. That doesn't mean that you can't change your mind or even your topic, but it will keep you from getting off topic.

**9. Write the rough draft.**

With your initial research complete, you are ready to start writing the paper. Use your sources only when necessary – don't pad the paper with quotes. Be sure that you explain the relevance of each citation to your argument. Don't simply quote or summarize and then move on. You must show us that you not only understand what you've just cited but that it applies to your point.

**10. Don't forget the MLA.**

For every citation you make in your paper, you must document it. Citations include quotes, summaries, and paraphrases. You use parenthetical notation in the paper itself that tells us the author's name and page number the information is on. The author's name allows us to look at your Works Cited page and easily find the complete bibliographical information because the Works Cited page is arranged alphabetically by author's last name. If a source has no author, then you use the title of the source. Your Troyka handbook discusses what to do when you have a work with no author. It also has the basic guidelines for MLA documentation, including examples. For the latest MLA guides on Internet sources, go to [www.mla.org](http://www.mla.org). You will find a link to documenting web sources on this homepage.

**11. Keep working while your teacher has your rough draft.**

Just because a teacher has your rough draft does not mean you still shouldn't keep doing work. You can look for other sources, work on your thesis, double check your works cited, etc. Of course, you may get your paper back with lots of corrections needed, but if you have turned in the best rough draft you can, then usually you won't be so off track that you have to change topics.

**12. Prepare the final version.**

When you get your draft back, read the comments carefully. If necessary, you may want to schedule a conference with the teacher. Do whatever he/she suggests and then go back over the paper with a fine tooth comb, looking for documentation errors, grammar and mechanical errors, organization, and other basic writing issues. Have someone else read your paper who can give you quality feedback. Before turning it in, be sure you've included your rough draft, and make a copy of it in case your teacher loses the paper (hey, it happened to me my freshman year).

For more tips on research, search the Internet. There are free on-line books and web sites devoted to research writing for college and high school students. Do stay away from the paper mills. 1) Most of these papers are poorly written, and 2) I know how to track down the source of plagiarized papers. Using a search engine, teachers can simply type in the title or a significant phrase from a suspected paper, and the Internet will tell us if it is from a paper mill.

If you are having trouble finding a topic, check out the class web page under Unit 4. There is a link to a list of over 200 topics. Also, you could write about one of the two extra essay units on the web page.