



Locating Sources

For some paper assignments, the only sources you'll be expected to consult are those assigned in class. These assignments will ask you to engage in some way with the assigned reading. For example, you might be asked to do a close reading of a poem for an English course or to test a theory using texts assigned in your Social Studies tutorial. For other assignments, you'll be asked to locate your own sources. Still other assignments may expect you to generate some of the sources yourself through lab research or interviews.

If you're writing in your concentration or in a discipline that has become familiar to you, you'll likely know what types of sources are considered reliable in that field. But when an assignment leaves the research process open and you're not familiar with the field, it can be challenging to figure out where to start. Between the holdings of books and journals in the Harvard libraries and the numerous electronic resources available through the library catalogs, you have access to an enormous variety of texts—literally millions of books and billions of files. In theory this is a great privilege: Scholars travel from around the world for access to Harvard's collections, and the Harvard librarians add to these collections with careful thought. But in practice, it can be paralyzing to start the process of figuring out which materials to consider.

Navigating the Harvard Libraries

The contents of the Harvard Library cover all languages and all eras of history; they represent all branches of learning and all parts of the globe. They are massive: upwards of 22,000,000 items, according to some estimates, a number that keeps growing. And they exist in an extraordinary array of information types, including manuscripts, maps, data sets, sound recordings, photographs and films, legal documents, and cultural artifacts.

You'll find everything in Harvard libraries from papyrus fragments to a #metoo archive to the most recent issues of the journal *Nature*. And it's all available for you to encounter, interrogate, learn from, and use to create something new and meaningful of your own.

Harvard's libraries inspire wonder and allow for infinite imagining, but given their number and complexity, they can bewilder as well as bedazzle. It's helpful to remember that libraries are human spaces powered by people with deep expertise who want to create conditions in which you can learn and thrive.





Over the course of a semester, your Expos 20 or Studio 20 section will meet with a librarian from Lamont or Widener, who will demystify the research process and introduce you to library databases (including [HOLLIS](#)) that might be a good fit for your research projects. They'll model ways to craft good searches, to test out the appropriateness of sources for your project, and to cite what you find. Ideally, your library engagements in Expos will equip you with strategies that you'll be able to use for other course-related research projects.

Harvard Libraries identify themselves as “Champions of Curiosity.” They host a wide array of [workshops and presentations](#); they design interesting exhibits, [both online and onsite](#); they hold events that are specifically designed for undergraduates; and they create all sorts of [research guides](#) for different topics and courses, including many [individual Expos classes](#).

You get better at research with practice, and you'll feel more comfortable with research projects over time. As you get acquainted with the libraries, there are many ways to seek help. In addition to reaching out to the librarian you meet in your Expos section, you can use the [Ask-a-Librarian](#) online form for questions, [chat with the librarians online](#), or [talk in person, one-on-one](#), at a time that's good for you.

Online Library Tools

In addition to providing access to numerous databases and publications through Hollis, the Harvard Library offers several resources to help you figure out whether sources you locate outside of Hollis can be accessed through Harvard.

Check Harvard Library bookmark

You can install the [Harvard Library bookmark](#) in your browser's bookmark bar. When you find a journal, magazine, or article online that requires a subscription, you can click the bookmark. If Harvard subscribes to the source, you will automatically be given access to it.

Lean Library

[Lean Library is a browser extension](#) that you can download and install in your browser. When enabled, Lean Library will automatically connect you to sources that Harvard subscribes to whenever you access them on the web. So, for example, if you had Lean Library installed and you visited the website of the Economist magazine, you would automatically get full subscriber access because Harvard subscribes. Because Lean Library will always check to see if Harvard has access to sources, it can sometimes be distracting. In that case, you may prefer to use the [Check Harvard Library bookmark](#), which only checks for Harvard access when you click on it.





Browzine

[Browzine](#) is an app that lets you access scholarly journals in a format that makes them easier to read on your phone or tablet.

CURIOSity Digital Collections

[This site](#) offers curated collections of Harvard's digital resources, organized into exhibits. This is a helpful resource if you want to look at items from Harvard's collection of rare photos, books, maps, and more—and you're not sure where to start.

University Press Scholarship Online

[University Press Scholarship Online](#) gives you direct access to scholarly books that have recently been published by university presses.

Understanding Your Assignment

Before you visit the library, you should make sure you understand what you're being asked to do and what constraints, if any, have been placed on your assignment. If you have been asked to review the literature on post-traumatic stress disorder, for example, do you understand how far back you should go? If you have been asked to write a paper about American policy in relation to Vietnam, do you know what policies to focus on? Or is the choice of policies up to you? Has your professor offered any guidance in narrowing your topic? If you are researching a genetic disorder, are there any guidelines for what you should be seeking to learn about the disorder beyond what it is and how it presents itself?

Even when you understand the basic expectations of your assignment, you should be prepared for the fact that you won't necessarily know exactly what you're looking for—and that you shouldn't know what you want to find before you start looking. Research is an iterative process—the more you learn about what's available and what's been written already, the clearer your own project becomes, which in turn means you need to go back to the library to further narrow and continue your search. Before you take the first plunge into your research, it will be helpful to ask the following questions:

How wide a net should I cast, given the scope of my assignment?

Because it's so easy to locate sources electronically, you may feel overwhelmed when you type "ADHD medication" into Google Scholar and get more than 300,000 hits, or when you search for information about college financial aid policies in a database and end up with several hundred





results. If you are writing a ten-page paper and are only expected to consult a few sources, you may want to talk to a librarian about what makes sense before you try to sift through the many sources available. On the other hand, if your topic turns up only a few hits, you may need to cast a wider net to make sure that you find the sources that are most relevant to your project.

What is required? What is optional?

Some professors will tell you how many outside sources to consult. When this is the case, try to think of this as a guideline for how much work seems reasonable rather than as a quota you must meet. If you think of the number of sources as a quota, you'll be less likely to look for sources that help you build your own argument and more likely to simply check off a number. If you choose the first three sources you find, you risk ending up with a paper that strings together unrelated ideas, rather than one that truly integrates the most important ideas to make a compelling argument.

Sometimes requirements laid out in an assignment will help you shape your paper. For example, an assignment might tell you to "look for an argument to critique" or to "use at least one source that puts forth a counterargument." If your assignment doesn't offer possible approaches, you can come up with your own. Consult the section of this guide on [the roles that a source can play in your paper](#) for some ideas on what sources can do in your paper that might, in turn, help you think about what types of sources to look for.

How will my use of sources help me meet the terms of the assignments?

If you have a sense of [why you're using sources](#) to write a particular paper, you will be able to begin the process of locating them efficiently. If you are doing a literature review and your goal is to analyze past research on a particular topic, then your use of sources is fairly straightforward, and you know what you're looking for. If your assignment is to come up with your own question based on course readings and then find your own sources to answer that question, your task may be less clear cut. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you search for sources:

- Am I surveying the literature on a particular topic?
- Am I looking for sources in order to better understand a particular topic so that I can come up with a question to ask?
- Am I looking for sources to help me develop my thesis and argument?

As you begin your research process, keep in mind that it's important to avoid looking only for sources that back up a position you've already decided to argue. Rather, you should see what ideas are out there and then decide how those ideas affect your thinking on a topic. It may be that someone disagrees with your interpretation, but rather than weakening your argument, this





source may well prompt you to strengthen your position. On the other hand, if you find that every source seems to validate your position, it's worth asking yourself if your thesis is, in fact, arguable.

How will I know when I'm done with my research?

Writing a research paper is rarely a linear process. In many cases you won't be able to narrow your focus to a research question until you begin reading about your chosen topic. Once you formulate your question, you'll need to go back to the library resources you've identified and look for the sources that are most useful to you as you answer your question. As you read those sources, you'll likely refine your thesis and consult even more sources as your paper takes shape. This doesn't mean that you'll never be finished with your paper, however. Remember that you need to decide what's reasonable for the scope of your assignment, and that your goal is to answer your research question, not to report on every source that has ever been produced on your topic. If you're having trouble knowing when to stop reading, consult your instructor.

Library research can be overwhelming, especially given the many resources available at Harvard. You might find it helpful to remember that most research assignments are designed to provide you with an opportunity to learn something about a topic related to your course material that interests you. With that in mind, use the resources available to you through the Harvard library system, and don't be afraid to ask for help.

