The Four Stages of Newspaper Reasearch

START HERE

Exploration

You've picked a topic, and read secondary sources. Now you are ready to begin the exploration phase.

What database do you want to start with? What geographical region and time period does your topic deal with? Start with a large and comprehensive database. If your topic is US based, I suggest Proquest, Readex, Chronicling America, or Newspapers.com.

What keywords did you notice in your secondary source reading? Choose a preliminary database and try some initial keyword searches. If you are searching for an exact phrase or name make sure to put it in quotes.

How many results did your keyword search turn up? Less than 100 results? You need better keywords. More than 50,000 results? Try more specific keywords.

Read through some of the results from your keyword searches. Is this the type of material you are looking for? Is this relevant to your topic?

Having trouble finding the right keywords? Consider, do the scholarly and historical names for your topic differ? For example, black minstrel troupes were known as "Georgia Minstrels" in the 19th century.

Do your search results contain any new keywords you could try searching with?

Try searching your keywords in a second or third database. Are there more or less result than your first database? Are the results more geographically diverse? Do the results cover a different time period?

Use the "Advanced Search" page of your databse to try a more specific search with specific dates, locations, or multiple sets of keywords.

Be aware it can take up to 2 hours of exploratory reading to find the right keywords for your topic.

Do you have 2-3 solid keywords that yield at least 200 results each? If so, you are ready to move onto stage 2.

Do I need to do both topic based reading and data collection? Depends on the limiations of your project.

Are you looking for information on a topic but not collecting data for a large databse? Move to topic based reading.

Topic Based Reading

Using the keywords you found in the exploration phase, conduct a preliminary search. Are you looking for information within a specific timeframe or geographic area? Refine your search results.

Sort your data in chronological order from oldest-newest. This helps you contrust a narrative from your results and read contextually.

Using the preview window as a guide, open as many results as possible. Even if you don't think a result is relevant, open it.

On the newspaper page, do you see the full page? If not click "view full page."

Ask yourself, what section of the paper is this? Longform article, classifieds, theatrical advertisements, society gossip? When did this occur? It is okay if you are disoriented or confused.

Read contextually. Look at the adjacent articles. Look at the place of publication and the date.

Does this result seem like something you might want to refer to again later? Save this in another window for the transcription process.

On your search result page look at the narrative of results. What is the time between search results? Where are search results published?

Search again in second database. Did you find more results?

Most importantly, be open to discovery. Try wider search results. Follow new trails in the archive. See what you discover.

Are you trying to fill a spreadsheet to make a map? Are you looking for statistical information on your topic? Move to data collection.

Are you also collecting data? Move to Data Collection. If not, skip to transcription.

Collecting Data

Choose to a primary databse to start collecting data from. Set up a preliminary spreadsheet. What information do you want to collect in your spreadsheet? Make sure your spreadsheet has columns for date, location, and citation.

Decide on the paramaters of your data collection. Are you going to read papers within a certain time range or geographical area? If so, refine your search by those metrics.

Sort your search results chronologically from oldest to newest. Open your spreadsheet and search results in two adjacent windows.

Start reading the results chronologically. Scan the preview box and open any results that seem relevant. You can either view each result directly after you open multiple tabs and then look through them.

Fill in your spreadsheet as you read results. Not every result be helpful.

If you find longer quotations, save them into another window for the transcription phase.

Dealing with a lot of results? This process can be tedious. Set yourself a quota to help. "I'll read 50 results and then take a break."

How do you know if you are done with data collection? Have you read through all the search results in your initial databse? Read through results in at least one other databse. Try one other national database and a regional databse.

How many pieces of data do I need? A good framework is: 50-100 points for a small project, 300-500 points for a medium project, and 1,000+ points for a large project.

Transcription

You are ready for transcription if you have finished collecting data and topic based reading and have a pile of saved articles.

Why transcription? Is this necessary? Transcription give you a set of ready to go quotes, helps you gain a deeper understanding of your topic and prepares you for longform writing.

Set yourself up with a transcription spreadsheet. I recommend columns for date, place of publicaiton, quote, notes/keywords, citation, and link.

Transcribe your clippings in chronological order. Dealing with a lot of clippings? It can helpful to sort clippings by topic or use select keywords in the notes section.

Dealing with a particularly long clipping? Use the voice to text feature in a word processor to transcribe more quickly. Double check voice to text for accurate spelling.

How many clippings do you need to transcribe? A good framework is: 20-30 clippings for a small project, 50-70 clippngs for a medium project, 100+ clippings for a large project.

Have you made it through all the step? Congragulations you've successfully completed historical newspaper research!

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