



RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES

How do you conduct research in the humanities? Where do you begin? Here are a few tips to consider when thinking about research in the humanities:

1. Start early: you don't have to know that you want to research medieval castles and building practices in 12th century England just yet! But you should be thinking about your interests. For example: Do you like American history, British literature, or Chinese art? In what time periods are you interested? These are the questions you should ask yourself when you are first beginning your research. Identifying your exact topic of research takes some time and effort, but once you know where your interests lie, it's easier to find a specific topic to research. You can also review the databases of student projects maintained by the Office for Undergraduate Research to get an idea of what kinds of projects other students in your discipline have accomplished.
2. Many books offer advice on this topic, but especially helpful are Chapters 3 and 4 of Wayne Booth's *The Craft of Research* (which gives you tools from moving from a broad topic to a research problem to a research question) and *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* by Cathy Birkenstein and Gerald Graff—a short book you can read cover to cover in an evening that gives you a crash course in academic research projects and how to put your voice into conversation with other scholars in your field.
3. The next step is to find a faculty member who has similar interests and/or whose teaching you especially appreciated or with whom you worked particularly well in class. Did you take a 20th century U.S. history class and love the way the professor teaches? Does he or she share some similar interests with you? Finding the right professor can take time and sometimes it can be challenging, but don't be afraid to talk to likely candidates about your potential research interests and learn more about theirs. Start making contact with these professors as early as possible so you'll have a background to draw on if you decide to go forward with this person as a mentor, and so you'll have time to find another mentor if needed.
4. If you have to decide between a mentor whose teaching you love and one whose research is exactly on your topic, you may want to consider focusing more on the former than the latter; other students' experiences have suggested that a good interpersonal and intellectual fit with your mentor can matter at least as much as a shared research focus.
5. Different faculty have different models for mentoring undergraduates in undergraduate research, but many will be willing to talk with you about your interests and theirs, and to give you advice and feedback on your research proposal, SURF application or other forms of initial research plan.





6. It's important to have a conversation with your faculty mentor about their expectations and yours. Will you schedule recurring meetings to review your progress? Will you check in informally on email? Will you work independently unless you have a problem? Clarifying these expectations at the beginning of the project prevents miscommunication and misunderstanding.
7. After you have gotten a sense of where your interests lie and have found one or even two or three professors with whom you might work, start thinking about a specific research question. Use the library tutorials (on the main UNC library homepage under "Services"), schedule an appointment with a reference librarian in your research area, and use books like the ones mentioned above to help you navigate key words and databases to help you discover and define your topic and develop your research question(s).
8. Keep in mind that it can take a while to develop your exact research question, so give yourself plenty of time to think things through. Also be aware of deadlines if you are applying to certain programs like SURF or an Honors Thesis. Once you know what it is you want to research, develop a plan with your faculty mentor.
9. When you have figured out all of these things, it is time to begin tracking down and reading the actual sources for your research! For some, this can be the most exciting process of the entire project, but for others it can be frustrating. Just give yourself plenty of time to consult resources and seek help and advice from books like Booth and Birkenstein/Graff (above), librarians, and faculty mentors on where to begin this process, how to put your own ideas into dialogue with your sources, and how to structure your project. With all of these steps completed, you can successfully conduct research in the humanities!

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