
CREATIVE HISTORY – KEYS TO LOCAL HISTORY

The focus of **Keys to Local History** is to help you learn about the history that is around you. This section discusses ways to think about what kind of questions to ask about your topic and where you can find resources to develop your research.

Because everyone approaches research differently and each project has many variables, this section is meant as a guideline to stimulate your thinking and improve your skills. Where appropriate, links will be made to other websites that provide more detailed step-by-step processes on particular topics.

THE FIRST STEPS

- Learn what kind of questions to ask and how to start researching.

ABOUT THE SOURCES

- Find out about primary sources, secondary sources and material culture
- Learn about the different primary sources, what you can discover in them, and where to find them
- Learn how to "read" primary sources and use them effectively

RESEARCH GUIDE

- Guidelines for how to research certain topics
- Ideas for organizing and managing your research
- Learn how to use primary sources effectively
- What you can do when you hit "brick walls"
- Reasons why it is important to you need to cite your sources

SHARING

- Ideas for creative ways of sharing your research with others.

THE FIRST STEPS

Starting a new historical research project is both exciting and overwhelming. If you have little experience doing research, try thinking of yourself as a detective and start gradually by investigating one lead at a time. Each step will become easier and more interesting as you get deeper into finding evidence for your case.

WHERE TO START?

- Start with a topic and a list of questions you want answered

WHAT'S NEXT?

- Gain a general understanding of the topic
- Refine your questions to discover clues.
- Figure out what kind of records will be the most help to you.
- Follow the record evidence where it leads you.
- Compare the evidence with other proven information.

NOW WHAT?

- Continue the cycle of questioning, evidence gathering, and looking at new records.
- Develop answers to your initial questions.
- Present your findings in an interesting and accurate way.

WHERE DO I START?

When first taking on a research project, the first two questions you will probably ask yourself are:

- what do I want to research?
- where do I start?

Sometimes inspiration comes from one object, a newspaper article, a story you heard from your grandmother, or a walk downtown. Find a topic that intrigues you, one that will keep your attention and keep you motivated throughout the process. Start by asking basic questions. Think about what you already know and what you do not. By asking new questions as you answer previous ones, you can eventually focus your topic into a very interesting and detailed project. Keep your eyes and ears open to all the possibilities!

Start your research with a series of *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how* questions. Make a list of your questions. These will keep you on track, help clarify your topic, and expand your ideas along the way. Below are only a handful of possible questions to ask about your surroundings and to inspire your research.

- How did some of your town streets get their names?
 - Did the names change over time, and if so, why?
- When was a prominent building in your town constructed?
 - Who built it and what types of businesses have been in it over the years?
- When was the house you live in built?
- Why was your town settled?
 - Was it because of a particular kind of industry or agricultural product?
- Who were the different people that settled in your town?
 - From where in the country did they migrate?
 - What other countries did they come from?
 - How did different ethnic groups contribute to your town?
- Did your community suffer any kind of health epidemic?
 - If so, when, what was it, and how did the community manage to overcome it?

- What can you find out about your town history from early tombstones?
- Were there any crimes, controversies, or other dramatic and highly publicized events?
 - When did they happen, what happened, who was involved?
- Does your town have any annual customs or festivals?
 - From where do the festivals originate?
- Was your town directly affected by the Revolutionary War, Civil War, or both?
 - If so, how?
 - What can you find out about those from your town who served?
- What can you find out about a local historical monument?
 - When and why was it erected, and what person or group is it dedicated to?
 - Was there a specific motivation by one group for the commemoration?
- How did the railroad, or other methods of transportation, affect the growth of your community?

WHAT'S NEXT?

Once you have a research topic, what is your next step? Search for books and start reading!

1. Using your initial questions as a guide, **search for secondary sources** (books, articles, and websites) that discuss your topic. Find out what other people have written about your subject of interest. When you have a good understanding of the people, places, and events, the easier it is to ask questions and narrow down your research plan.

Books

- Start with a card catalog search at your public library or local history library.
- Do a search on the main theme of your topic.
- If the results are limited, try a more specific search or think of different descriptive words. Sometimes you need to adapt your search to the keywords used in the library's catalog.
- If a library does not have the book you need, most have interlibrary loans, a system of sharing books with other institutions. Check with your local library to find out their policies.

Articles

- Articles can be found in scholarly journals, trade journals, magazines and newspapers.
- Larger libraries house a variety of current journals, magazines and newspaper, along with older periodicals on microfilm that are searchable on-site.
- Most libraries also have links to online journal sources. Usually you can only gain access to the online journals at the library. Find out if you are able to log on to the journal databases remotely using the library website and your library card.
- Go to an online tutorial at Northeastern Library's for more about *Finding Articles* [http://www.lib.neu.edu/online_research/help/online_tutorials/finding_articles/]

Websites

Entering your research topic into an online search engine, such as Google or Yahoo, is an excellent way to quickly get broad information about your topic. But there are some things to consider when using web-based sources for historical research.

- A high percentage of websites with historical topics are not written by professional historians. That does not mean these sites are not useful, you just need to use them wisely.
- Websites maintained by enthusiasts are often full of information and a great way to understand your subject, but you must always be cautious and look for what sources were used.
- See [How to Identify Reputable Sources](#) for more information about how to identify reliable websites.
- See [State Links](#) to find a list of major institutional and academic online sources in your state.

If possible, do your research online at home rather than at the library. Often it can give you the time you need to organize your research plan, and having a good plan will make you more productive at the library.

2. Keep track of all the sources you find.

- Make a list of the books and articles you want to read.
- As you scan through the books you find, make a note of how useful the sources are on your books and articles list.
- Cross off the books on your list that are of little help, this can greatly minimize frustrating repetition!
- As you search for websites, only bookmark the useful and interesting ones and keep them organized in topic folders in your browser. Rename them if necessary, this saves you from time-consuming searching through your growing bookmark list.
- See [Organizing and Managing Your Research](#) for hints.

3. As you read through a book or article, be aware of the **footnotes**, **endnotes**, and especially the **bibliography**.

- Bibliographies are an often-overlooked resource with beginners. By browsing through the list you can discover books, articles, original documents, and other collections, many of which might apply to your research direction.
- Continue to add potentially useful books and articles you find to your source list.
- Look for manuscripts or other original documents in the bibliography. You might be able to find some of those sources locally to analyze yourself.

- Properly executed footnotes or endnotes might illustrate a specific point within the text in more detail. They might also include the author's thoughts about the source that can inspire new questions for your research.

4. The index is your friend. If you are skimming a book for a specific person, place or topic, open to the back of the book first and search the index before reading. This can save you a great deal of time by quickly letting you know if a book will be helpful or not. You might also get new ideas by the other topics listed.

5. Never underestimate the knowledge of the research librarian! If your topic is very specific; you have not been able to locate any books; if you are still unsure about where to start; or if you want to get a better idea of what the library has to offer, **just ask.**

- Explain your research topic, keeping the description short and to the point.
- Ask if he/she can suggest some key books or collections.
- Ask for help when you get stuck, the librarian might have suggestions for new research directions you never considered.
- At smaller, less formal libraries, sometimes you get lucky and bump into another researcher who knows about your topic and will share their ideas.
- Finally, always be respectful and friendly to both librarians and other patrons.

SO I HAVE SOME BACKGROUND INFORMATION...NOW WHAT?

Now that you have some basic knowledge about your topic, you have probably formulated some new questions. At this point you can start digging into more interesting sources with the hopes of discovering some original documents to evaluate for your specific needs.

Choose a portion of your topic and again ask *who, what, where, when, why, and how*. You might not be able to answer all of these questions all the time, but they are the perfect guides to keep you on track.

Different records can give you different types of information, and they can verify what you already know. About the Sources will give you an overview of the many types of original (primary) sources you might want to use in your research. Keep in mind the questions you want to answer as you look through the primary source list. Some records will be better at answering certain questions than others.

FOR EXAMPLE: You want to know which house your grandfather lived in around 1900. To get the best results, you might choose to look at:

- 1900 census records
- City directories
- Deeds
- Photographs of the house or block
- Plat maps
- Fire insurance maps

You might find the answer right away by looking at the census record, but do not exclude the other sources. You might discover some interesting information about the house itself that could then tell you more about your grandfather. The more examples you have to verify your answers the more confident you will be in your research. See [How to “Read” Primary Sources](#) for more information.

As you explore a variety of records you will gain a better understanding of how valuable primary sources can be in your historical research.