

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA STUDIES

NAVIGATING RESEARCH: Finding, Reviewing, and Abstracting Sources

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INFORMATION PATHWAYS



Finding Sources: Where to Look, and How to Decide What's Worth Your Time

Pardon the pedanticism, but we're going to start out with a little review. Furthermore, we'll begin at a place that should look familiar to you: the [New School Library's](#) website. The New School is part of a [consortium](#) of schools -- including NYU, the New York School of Interior Design, Cooper Union -- that share access to the BobCat catalog and to one another's libraries. Start here in your search for books (remember them?) and multimedia materials. [Image: Robert Mankoff, Ed., *The Complete Cartoons of the New Yorker* (New York: Black Dog & Leventhal, 2004).]

NYU has a fantastic audio-visual library, the [Avery Fisher Center for Music and Media](#). If you can't find what you're looking for on Bobcat, try one of the [other libraries](#) in New York -- including the [New York](#), [Brooklyn](#), and [Queens](#) public libraries. You can link to all of these libraries' catalogs through the "[Other Library Catalogs](#)" link on the New School library's homepage. If you're not in New York -- and I'm aware that many of you are

not -- try your **local public and university library catalogs**. And if you *still* can't find it, try [WorldCat](#) and place a request through Interlibrary Loan. Materials loaned by another institution may take weeks to arrive -- so it's always best to start your resource search as early as possible so that you can build in time for material delivery.

If you're not already familiar with World Cat, you'll be amazed by what a wonderful resource it is. It's the "world's largest library catalogue, containing more than 35 million records from more than 50,000 libraries in more than 90 countries" ([New School Libraries](#)).

"You can search for popular books, music CDs and videos—all of the physical items you're used to getting from libraries. You can also discover many new kinds of digital content, such as downloadable audiobooks. You may also find article citations with links to their full text; authoritative research materials, such as documents and photos of local or historic significance; and digital versions of rare items that aren't available to the public. Because WorldCat libraries serve diverse communities in dozens of countries, resources are available in many languages...." ([WorldCat](#))

In order to make sure I'm conducting an exhaustive search for book resources relevant to a particular research project, I often visit **WorldCat** and try every keyword combination I can think of. If, for instance, I'm looking for books on music and architecture, I search for "music" + "architecture," "music" + "space," "sound" + "architecture," "sound" + "space"... You get the picture. Once I've collected a list of titles, I try to locate each of those titles in the catalogs listed above.

I also scan the **bibliographies** of books and articles that have proven useful, or that I've particularly enjoyed. Often, this is a great way to gather leads to hard-to-find primary sources and archival collections. In addition, if I'm reading a text and I'm particularly taken by a quotation or idea that the author attributes to someone else, I'm sure to locate the foot- or endnote or bibliographic citation for the referenced work.

And for further vetting, before I decide that it's worth my money and time to purchase and read a particular book, I look for **book reviews** in academic journals, in one of the highly regarded book review journals -- or even on Amazon. These reviews are often comparative -- the reviewer compares and contrasts two or more books on a particular topic -- so I'm able to determine which books have the "cast" I'm looking for. In order to locate these book reviews, you can either search the online periodicals databases -- searching for the book's title + "book review" -- or you can Google the book title + "review" + "c.v." (or "curriculum vita"), which should bring you to the c.v.'s of academics who have reviewed the texts you're considering. Their vitae should identify the periodicals in which the reviews appear, and you can then track down the appropriate issues.

When I'm approaching a body of literature or a field of study that's relatively new to me, and I don't quite know where to begin, I **search syllabi posted online** to see what texts faculty commonly assign for courses in those fields. For instance, if I wanted to find out more about contemporary feminist theory, about which I know very little, I'd try a few Google searches to locate syllabi that might offer some valuable leads. So, I'd search for "contemporary femin*" + "syllabus," then maybe broaden out to "feminist theory" + "syllabus" to compile a list of books, articles, chapters, and web resources that faculty commonly assign in courses on contemporary feminism. I've found this technique particularly helpful because I can rely on my academic colleagues to have already screened these resources for me. In most cases.

Colleagues, by the way, are excellent resources. Professors, librarians, co-workers, and fellow students are invariably chock-full of great reading recommendations, research leads, etc. This is why an "academic community" exists -- so that we can share our knowledge and experience and, in the process, make a greater collective contribution to the field, and the world, than we could individually.

Now, let's switch gears from the organic to the digital -- from human resources to online resources. Let's take a look at the myriad [electronic resources](#) available through the Library's website. Under the section labeled "Electronic Resources by Subject," pull down the menu and choose "Communication and Media Studies." Be aware, though, that you're likely to find media- and communication-related sources in nearly all of these subject categories -- from "Anthropology" to "Gender and Sexuality Studies" to "Sociology." Scroll down through the list of communication-related resources and read the "blurb" for each listing. Note the kinds of resources cataloged in each, the dates available -- and which services offer full-text.

Here are a few resources of note: **Communication Abstracts** provides abstracts to an impressive list of [journals](#) relevant to our field. **JStor** offers access to full-text humanities and social science articles, and is particularly strong in its cultural studies offerings. **ProQuest** offers several services, including a database of dissertations and theses -- two resources that should not be overlooked.

One great challenge is knowing what keywords to search for. It's always best to try various keyword combinations to ensure that you're being as inclusive as possible in your search. Work that's relevant to your project won't necessarily be framed the same way you intend to frame yours, and researchers may very well use terminology quite different than that which you're using. See [this article](#) from the 2/5/06 *New York Times* about the challenges -- here, within the hard sciences, but equally applicable to other fields -- of knowing what to search for, and the mistakes some have made in "rediscovering the already discovered."

Note the offerings in the "Research Tools for Electronic Resources" area: the Periodicals Searcher and the **Refworks** Citation Manager.

Check out the "Reference and General Information Databases" within the "Electronic Resources by Subject" pull-down menu, and note the availability of resources ranging from the Oxford English Dictionary to image libraries to census data to statistical abstracts. Quite astounding, eh?

But of course, not all knowledge is to be had through the New School Library's website. The web's full of excellent faculty and **research institute websites**, and a growing body of **peer-reviewed online journals** (e.g., the [International Journal of Communication](#)). These are just a few of the innumerable resources available on the Web:

- [Communication Institute for Online Scholarship](#)
- [Tables of Contents](#) of Recent Communication Publications
- University of Iowa Department of Communication Studies [Links to Resources](#)
- Media & Communication Studies Site: list of [journals](#), [calls for papers](#)
- [National Archives & Records Administration](#)
- [Newsweek Media Research Index](#)

It's important to remember, though, that not all that has been digitized is worth knowing! It's important to be able to assess the [credibility of online sources](#) so that you're not caught basing your research hypothesis on something you read in some high school student's blog. Johns Hopkins University identifies several [criteria for evaluating web resources](#): **authorship, publishing body, point of view or bias, referral to other sources, verifiability, and currency.**

How might you assess the "cast" or "slant" of a media research website if you didn't know of the hosting organization's political or religious affiliation? The [Media Research Center](#) makes it easy for you, since right at the top of their webpage they state their mission: "neutralizing liberal media bias." But what about [The Weekly Standard](#), or [The Wall Street Journal](#)? Imagine you're a foreign student, and you're not aware of these publications' reputations. Or, imagine yourself accessing online archives of foreign publications: how might you assess their objectivity?

Furthermore, not all that is worth knowing has been digitized! There is much to be said for the value of accessing -- and handling -- **original materials**. There are **archival collections** worth exploring and human resources worth tapping. The [Library of Congress](#) and [Yale](#) are two among many institutions that have comic book archives. Northwestern University maintains a collection of letters, concert programs, instruments, and recorded interviews and lectures by [John Cage](#). The Whitney has its [Andy Warhol Film Project](#) and its [research library](#); MoMA, its [Celeste Bartos Film Study Center](#) and Circulating Film and Video Library; and [Electronic Arts Intermix](#), its collection of video art. And there are thousands more exciting, eclectic, but underused, collections out there (check out [Yale's list](#)). It takes a creative and resourceful researcher to seek out these sources -- but such effort is invariably repaid many times over.

But I will say a few words about **researching with footage -- or, more generally, researching with media content**. What if you want to track down cable tv shows or talk radio content that's relevant to your proposed project. Where do you start? Well, the network's or channel's or station's website is a good place to begin. Some offer extensive programming archives online. In other cases, you may have to contact the network's librarian or archivist for help, and he or she may send you to the *production company that made the content*. You could also do a web search to determine the production company, and contact them directly. Check old tv listings or programming schedules to determine when things aired, so that you can use this information to help *others help you* to track down the material you're looking for.

As much as I wish there were, there's no easy, foolproof way to go about this kind of "content hunt." It's a matter of following leads, and diligently following up. The contact people will vary between organizations, as will access policies.

HBO Sports, of all places, offers some [tips](#) on locating footage for your research project. Some commercial media companies will gladly offer footage. But, content is a commodity, which, unfortunately, means that you often have to pay (dearly!) for it. See [Footage.net](#), [Stock Footage Online](#), [ITN Archive](#), [Getty Images](#) and Getty's [Archive Films](#) (see also Getty's [Rights & Clearances](#) page). You might also refer to [The Researcher's Guide: Film, Television, Radio, and Related Documentation Collections in the UK](#), to which, as far as I know, there isn't a US counterpart. Correct me if I'm wrong.

Reading Effectively

Once I decide what's *worth* reading, I start reading by scanning the chapter titles and index or, if it's an essay or article, the abstract and subheads. I read the article's or book's main **introduction and conclusion**, then return to the beginning and scan through, focusing on the introductory and concluding paragraphs in each chapter of the book or section of the article. As you read more and more, you'll have a better and better sense of what you're looking for, and you'll start to read more purposively and efficiently. Design researchers Carole Gray and Julian Malins, authors of *Visualizing Research A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*, recommend developing a manageable **list of keywords or research descriptors**, and keeping those concepts in mind as you read to help you focus and select sections that are worth your time (p. 45; These same keywords should also help to structure your research journal). You should of course scan a work in its entirety to enable to you appreciate the author's overall argument, but your keywords can help you to identify particularly relevant sections that warrant a closer reading. If you highlight – either on hard copies, or via Acrobat Reader – consider using **color-coding** to track your keywords. This color-coding system might even extend to your paper files or folders on your desktop, to help you keep track of which resources apply to which themes.

Historian Michelle Murphy, of the University of Toronto, offers other potentially helpful strategies for approaching a difficult text. First, she says, **expect *not* to “get it” on the first pass**. In your first reading, “identify what you understand about the texts, and mark what you do not understand”; “periodically pause and rephrase” your understanding of the argument; list crucial concepts, and **look up words you are not familiar with**; and “ask yourself if the style [in which] the text is written is important to the argument.” The second time through, pay close attention to difficult passages, reread them – and if you still don't get them – discuss those passages with a colleague or advisor. Take notes, and once you've reached the end, make a summary or map of the argument.

There's no substitute for working slowly and methodically through a text. But there are supplemental resources – big kids' *CliffsNotes*, if you will – that you might reference *after* you've taken your best stab at a text, to confirm or revise your understanding. I find the following especially useful:

- Vincent B. Leitch, Ed., *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).
- W.J.T. Mitchell's U Chicago Media Theory Class's Media Theory Glossary: <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/navigation.htm>
- Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- Media and Communications Site @ University of Wales, Aberystwyth: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/>

All are reputable sources, by noted scholars – which is important. Taking your Heidegger cues from some high school freshman in Idaho is risky business. See also the meta-

discussion in the key media and cultural studies anthologies: Michael Ryan's *Cultural Studies: An Anthology*, Meenakshi Gigi Durham's and Douglas Kellner's *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin's and Nick Montfort's *The New Media Reader*. The texts introducing each of the books' sections provide useful synopses of the anthologized texts – all seminal works in their respective fields. And check out the dictionaries: Raymond Williams' *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* and Tony Bennett et al.'s revision, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*.

But, as I've said, you've got to grapple with the source texts before any of these support texts can help to confirm your understanding. And, indeed, many academic and theoretical texts make for slow and laborious reading. Sometimes this is because the author is working through complex ideas, and occasionally he or she might be writing under the assumption that the reader is already an *insider* to the field, and thus familiar with the field's linguistic conventions. And sometimes reading is hard because the writing's simply bad. Peter Barry, author of *Beginning Theory*, offers some guidelines to keep in mind when we encounter intimidating readings:

Firstly, we must have some *initial* patience with the difficult surface of the writing. We must avoid the too-ready conclusion that [academic writing] is just meaningless, pretentious jargon (that is, that the theory is at fault). *Secondly*, on the other hand, we must, for obvious reasons, resist the view that we ourselves are intellectually incapable of coping with it (that is, that we are at fault). *Thirdly*, and crucially, we must not assume that the difficulty of theoretical writing is *always* the dress of profound ideas – only that it *might* sometimes be, which leaves the onus of discrimination on us. To sum up this attitude: we are looking, in [theory or other academic writing], for something we can use, not something which (sic) will use us. We ought not to issue theory with a blank cheque to spend our times for us... Do not, then, be *endlessly* patient with theory (pp. 7-8).

In other words, we need to be patient with difficult reading – but there's a limit to that patience. It might take you a while – you might need to go through a few graduate seminars and write a few graduate papers – before your “crap detector,” to borrow Neil Postman's phrase, turns on: before you learn to discern which texts are worth your time, and which are not; which are difficult but potentially rewarding texts, and which are overblown hokum. There's no shortage of hokum out there, unfortunately.

As I read, I keep in mind a series of questions that Postman, my dissertation advisor, presented to my colleagues and me on our first day of graduate school. The following is adapted from Postman's list, with a few hints from Cresswell thrown in:

1. In two or three sentences, what is the **central thesis** of this work, or what is the **major problem** it is addressing?
2. In two or three sentences, on what **assumptions** or points is the thesis of the work built, in logical order?
3. What are the **major terms or concepts** central to this work, and how does the writer define these terms?
 - Interrogate buzzwords

- How are key concepts related to each other?
4. What are the **methods of research and argumentation and kinds of evidence** used to develop and support the thesis of the work?
 - What research methods – content analysis, interviews, discourse analysis, fieldwork, etc. – did the author employ?
 - What methods of argumentation, or rhetorical strategies, is he or she employing to make his/her case? How else could the argument be made? Is it sufficiently elaborated?
 - How is he or she supporting his/her arguments?
 5. In your judgment, what are the **limitations, shortcomings, errors, or weaknesses** in the work?
 6. In your judgment, what are the **major contributions** of this work to your understanding of the field?

Each week, in each of my graduate seminars, I was expected to submit a two-page abstract, addressing these six questions, of each book we read for that week. I'm no longer quite so diligent in composing and cataloguing thorough abstracts of each text I read – but I do recognize the value of the exercise: I still frequently refer to my notebooks of grad school abstracts.

Marie desJardins, computer scientist and electrical engineer, proposes a slightly different practice for engaging with texts. She writes:

To really understand a paper, you have to understand the **motivations** for the problem posed, the **choices** made in finding a solution, the **assumptions** behind the solution, whether the assumptions are realistic and whether they can be removed without invalidating the approach, **future directions for research**, what was actually accomplished or implemented, the validity (or lack thereof) of the theoretical justifications or empirical demonstrations, and the potential for extending and scaling the algorithm up.

In considering the author's *motivation*, we might ask about the historical, social, cultural, or professional context from which the author is writing, and to which he or she is speaking. What other ideas or texts is the author in dialogue with? We might also ask how the author would have answered the “*so what?*” question; how would he or she have explained to a reader why he or she should care about the argument in the text? Not all theory has to *do* things in the world – but we might consider what the theory might allow us to do, materially or symbolically, with it. What does it allow us to think *through*, to think *with*? What power does it wield? *Choices* might refer to methods, or the sample the researcher chooses to draw from, or the theoretical framework he or she uses. What does the author identify as potential *future directions* for research? Are you following any of his/her leads?

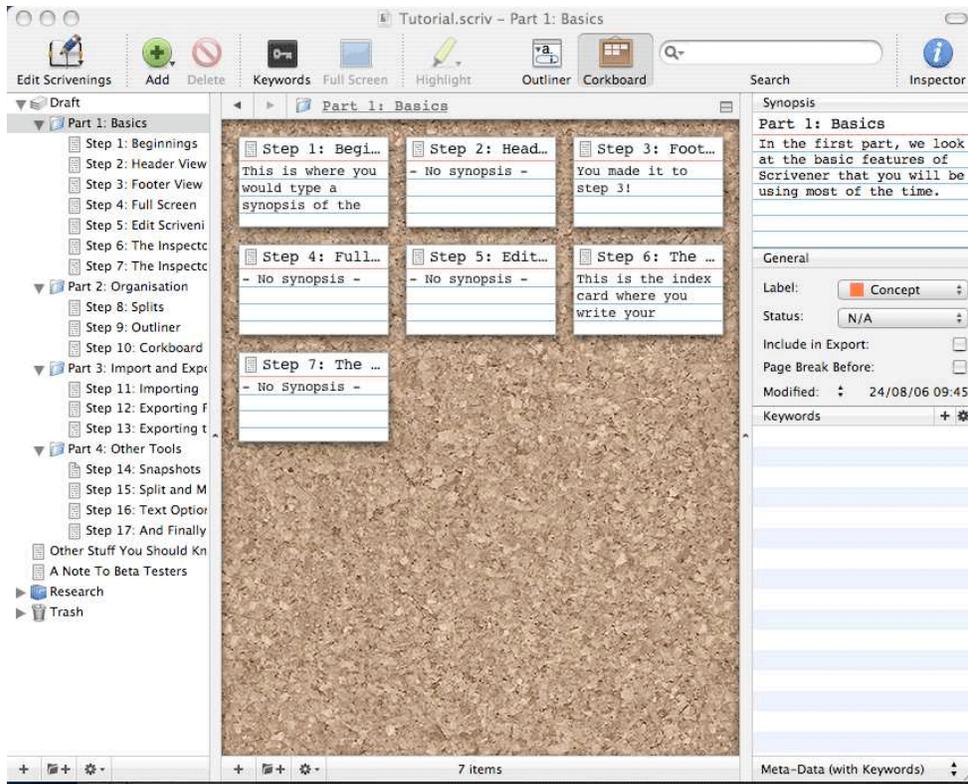
Note-taking & Abstracting

These aren't rhetorical questions. You should actually make *note* of your responses, for future reference. The Postman/Cresswell list, supplemented with some of desJardin's suggestions and issues that are unique to your own specific projects, serve as an effective **abstract template**. This template will evolve as you get more deeply involved in your research and

discover what you're asking from each of your sources, what you want to *remember* from each source. Add these abstracts to your research journal – ideally, in a searchable format online – so you can easily search for patterns and keywords.

Abstracts have personal value, of course, in that they allow you to keep record of what you're reading and watching and listening to. But getting in the habit of writing abstracts is useful because they have plenty of applications in the professional world. You may have noticed the abstracts at the top of many academic articles or essays; publishers will usually ask you to provide a brief (usually about 150 words) abstract with your submission. You need to know how to distill your argument and methods and explain the value of your contribution. You'll also commonly be asked to submit abstracts as part of your application or proposal to participate in academic or professional conferences or festivals, or to have your work considered for inclusion in exhibitions or edited volumes. In these cases, you'll need to be able to explain, in just a couple hundred words, what your work proposes to "do," what methods you're using, what key concepts you're working with, in what traditions you're working, etc. Organizers and editors have hundreds – if not thousands – of proposals to wade through, so you need to be able to get across your specificity and soundness and potential value of your project quickly and clearly.

Abstracts are of course *abstracted* critical summaries of a text as a whole, but you'll still want to take notes on particular passages and specific details from your research sources. Note-taking can be done the old-fashioned way -- with pen and paper (or index cards) -- or the high-tech way: with a note-taking software program. The Center for History and New Media at George Mason University has developed [Scribe](#) and made it available for download on its website. [ndxCards](#) is another program available for sale. I like [Scrivener](#) (see below). Steven Johnson, author of *Everything Bad is Good for You* and *Interface Culture*, describes [how he uses DevonThink](#) (see also the [NYT article](#)), available for Mac OSX, to organize his research notes.



But all the technology in the world can't make a great note-taker. In fact, with the increased ease of note-taking, it's much easier for a researcher to simply record *everything* he or she reads, often copying directly from source text to computer file. Barzun and Graff offer some helpful advice: when taking notes, "...use your own words, not the author's" (p. 27). This practice will help you to avoid accidental plagiarism later on, when you write up your report. What's more, paraphrased rather than quoted notes (although it is of course appropriate to quote if an author presents something particularly well, and you intend to quote him or her in your report or production) get you into the practice of reformulating your research material, making it your own, and priming your brain to organize that material into an original format or argument.

Be diligent about **noting all bibliographic information** as you collect your sources; if you forget to take note of the journal's issue number or the book's publication location, you might have to track down that source again when you're compiling your bibliography – and by then, the source might be checked out from the library or removed from the web. If your research involves art or design pieces – not just writing *about* those works, but reference to the works themselves – you'll want to make sure to record the creator/designer, the title of the work, a brief description of the work, the date (year of origin, years of development), the materials, the dimensions, venues in which the work is housed and means of public access, and reviews and references. Consider using bibliographic software like RefWords, ProCite, or EndNote.

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