

Historical Research for Undergraduates

Annotated Bibliography

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Introduction

Historical research is not straightforward. It is long in a double sense – first, because a dissertation is a long piece of work (in excess of 10,000 words), and second, because it takes a long time to complete (maybe a year or more). It is on a different scale to anything you have done before. As you can see from the following schematic diagram, the process of producing a piece of historical research encompasses a lot of stages

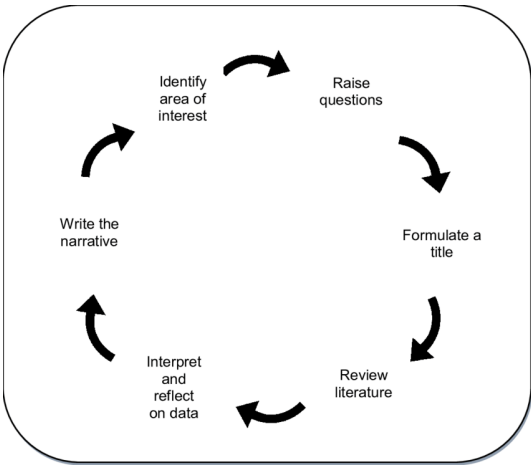


FIGURE 1 Schematic presentation of the historical research process. Source: J. Esterhuizen, G. H. van Rensburg and J. E. Tjallinks, 'A Historical Perspective on the Professional Development of Black South African Nurses: 1908–1994', *Africa Journal of Nursing and Midwifery*, 15:2 (2023), pp. 16–29.

Completing a dissertation involves applying most of the historical and transferable skills that you will have developed over the course of your degree, including:

Historical skills	Transferable skills
Understanding historical context	Project design
Synthesizing secondary scholarship	Project management
Engaging with a body of primary sources	Note-taking
Understanding significance	Time management
Close reading and analysis	Communication
Developing an argument	Organization
	Writing and editing
	Responding to feedback
	Self-reflection

No annotated bibliography on historical research could cover every possible individual research topic – many such resources already exist, and part of the aim of this resource is to encourage you to conduct such research for yourself. Instead, this resource provides you with several different routes into independent historical research. The aim is to orientate rather than to direct. The annotated bibliography is structured into three sections:

- 1 Some **key studies on the historical research process** which are accessible for undergraduate students. Read these if you want to know what historians have said about conducting research within the discipline.
- 2 Some **key online repositories and resources** that are useful irrespective of subject specialism, period or methodology. Access these if you want to find useful materials or start to get an overview of the topic that you’re interested in researching.
- 3 **Online guides to conducting historical research.** Have a look at these if you want to see what some historical organizations and university departments have to say about the process of researching history.

Key studies

Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

Howell and Prevenier explore how historians critically engage with sources to reconstruct the past. The authors emphasize that historical sources – whether written, oral, visual or material – are not neutral conveyors of fact but are shaped by context and the methodological and interpretive choices of historians. The book guides readers through the technical analysis of sources, with a particular emphasis on documents, and discusses how historians authenticate, decode and interpret evidence. The authors challenge the positivist notion of objective historical truth, arguing instead that historical understanding is shaped by the historian's perspective and the time in which they write. There is a specific focus on the construction of historical arguments based on evidence, which is key for producing persuasive, independent research in history.

Mary Abbott (ed.), *History Skills: A Student's Handbook*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2009).

An essential guide to studying history at university, this book offers a range of practical advice. Taking as its starting point the premise that studying the past is not just about knowledge and understanding, Abbott and her fellow contributors emphasize the importance of developing the skills to investigate, evaluate and communicate what you have found to others. Of particular relevance for history students wishing to cultivate their research skills are the chapters on sources and resources, libraries, taking notes, coursework and dissertations, the latter of which (by Tony Kirby) walks students through the process of devising, researching and writing up a substantial piece of independent research. It stresses the importance of following your institution's ethical guidelines when it comes to conducting research.

Anthony Brundage, *Going to the Sources: A Guide to Historical Research and Writing*, 5th edn (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

Beginning with a concise overview of key developments in twentieth-century historiography that stresses the diversity of current frameworks, Brundage's book offers comprehensive guidance for the student researcher. It guides the reader through the process of refining research topics, identifying and evaluating primary and secondary sources, and engaging critically with scholarship, emphasizing the importance of critical reading. Chapters on 'Getting the Most Out of History Books' and 'Exploring Changing Interpretations' offer particularly useful advice on how to read secondary scholarship productively and to write it up in historiographical essays. Acknowledging history's traditional focus on texts, Brundage provides advice on engaging with non-textual sources, although the range of kinds of evidence mentioned is not as wide or comprehensive as in other books cited in this annotated bibliography (for instance, material culture is not mentioned).

William Kelleher Storey, *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, 6th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

Although its title suggests that it focuses on writing, this book stresses the intimate connection between the research and writing processes in history. Beginning with the early stages of identifying a topic and formulating a research question, it moves on to cover interpreting and drawing inferences from source materials. As with other works in this annotated bibliography, it acknowledges the diversity of historical approaches and sources, including guidelines for students engaged in oral history, as well as those making use of visual and material culture in their inquiries. Practical issues such as plagiarism and searching online are also addressed in more recent editions of the text. The author's fine-grained focus on writing is particularly helpful, covering issues not found in other works listed here, such as sentence structure, precise wording and editing.

Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 10th edn (Boston, MA, and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2021).

Although focused mainly on the writing of history, this concise manual also offers practical advice on devising and producing research projects. It covers essential topics such as thesis development, source evaluation, citation styles and structuring arguments. It offers step-by-step instructions and examples that are designed to build skills in evaluating sources, critical reading, historical analysis and referencing accurately. Later editions of the guide include advice on conducting digital research, an essential skill for history undergraduates nowadays. The guide is presented in a highly accessible and user-friendly way, for example through the inclusion of 'hints and tips' for students. For example, 'tips for writers' sections include questions for evaluating different kinds of primary sources and to help you to engage critically with secondary sources.

Online resources

British History Online: <https://www.british-history.ac.uk> (freely available online)

British History Online is a digital library of key primary and secondary sources for the history of Britain and Ireland. It includes government records, historical maps and scholarly editions of texts. The platform is especially useful for students researching British political, social and legal history. Its curated collections and search tools make it easy to navigate historical documents and contextualize findings.

Europeana: <https://www.europeana.eu> (freely available online)

Europeana is a digital portal that provides access to millions of digitized items from European museums, libraries and archives. It includes photographs, artworks, manuscripts and audiovisual materials, making it a rich repository for finding primary sources, enabling students to explore history across national boundaries and time periods. Europeana's multilingual interface and thematic collections enhance its accessibility.

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com> (freely available online)

Google Scholar is a freely accessible search engine for scholarly literature across disciplines. While not history-specific, it is useful for locating academic articles, theses and books. Students can use it to track citations, access related works and find open-access content. Google Scholar complements other databases by offering a broad overview of available research.

Historical Abstracts: <https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/historical-abstracts> (subscription-only database)

Historical Abstracts is a premier database for scholarly literature on world history from 1450 to the present, excluding the United States and Canada. It provides access to journal articles, book reviews and dissertations, making it an essential tool for historical research. Students can use it to find peer-reviewed sources on a wide range of historical topics and regions. The database is particularly useful for identifying secondary sources and tracking historiographical trends. It also indexes a substantial – and growing – number of open access journals.

Institute of Historical Research (IHR) – Open and Free Access Materials for Research: <https://www.history.ac.uk/research/research-resources-support-historians/open-free-access-materials-research> (freely available online)

The IHR offers access to over 750 freely available digital resources, including primary sources, bibliographies and thematic collections. It also provides practical advice on using online sources and navigating digital archives, making it ideal for students conducting independent historical research.

JSTOR: <https://www.jstor.org> (some content freely available online, but other items will require you to login via your institution)

JSTOR is a digital library that offers access to thousands of academic journals, books and primary sources across multiple disciplines. It is especially valuable for history students seeking older journal articles and classic scholarship. JSTOR's comprehensive archive allows users to explore

the development of historical debates over time. Its advanced search features and stable URLs make it a reliable resource for academic research and citation.

Project MUSE: <https://muse.jhu.edu> (subscription-only database)

Project MUSE provides access to current scholarly content in the humanities and social sciences, including numerous history journals and books. The platform is user-friendly and supports full-text searching, making it easy for students to locate relevant materials. Project MUSE is particularly useful for accessing content from university presses and scholarly societies.

Zotero: <https://www.zotero.org> (freely available online)

Zotero is a free, open-source reference management tool that helps students collect, organize and cite research materials. It integrates with web browsers and word processors, streamlining the research and writing process. Zotero supports a wide range of citation styles and allows users to create shared libraries for collaborative projects. It is particularly helpful for managing large numbers of sources and ensuring accurate referencing.

Online guides

American Historical Association (AHA) – Resource Library: <https://www.historians.org/teaching-learning/aha-resource-library/> (freely available online)

The AHA's Resource Library provides a comprehensive collection of materials for history students and educators. It includes guides on historical thinking, primary source analysis, writing in history and professional standards. The library is a valuable tool for students learning how to research and write history effectively.

University of California, Berkeley – Research & Writing Guide: <https://history.berkeley.edu/undergraduate/academic-resources/research-writing-guide> (freely available online)

UC Berkeley's Department of History provides a detailed guide on choosing research topics, distinguishing between primary and secondary sources, and structuring historical arguments. This guide is especially helpful for students beginning their first major research project or dissertation.

University of Toronto – History Research Guide: <https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/history> (freely available online)

This comprehensive guide includes tips on finding and evaluating sources, using archives and correct citation practices. It also links to key databases and digital collections, making it a practical starting point for any historical research project.

University of Oxford – History Faculty Library Research Guide: <https://libguides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/history> (freely available online)

Oxford's Bodleian Libraries provide a detailed guide for history students, covering everything from finding primary sources to using bibliographic databases. It includes tutorials and links to digitized collections, ideal for both beginners and advanced undergraduates conducting historical research.

University of Michigan – History Research Guide: <https://guides.lib.umich.edu/history> (freely available online)

This guide offers tools for finding books, articles and primary sources, along with citation help and advice on research strategies. It is tailored to undergraduate needs and includes links to major digital archives and databases for historical research.

Conclusion

Research is fundamental to history at university. Your lecturers are active researchers with expertise in particular periods of history, geographical locations, methodologies and theoretical and interpretive frameworks. They publish their research and share it with you in lectures and seminars. However, they don't just tell you about what they have done but, over the course of your degree, engage you in increasingly independent primary research activities, often culminating in a final-year research project (i.e. a dissertation). History at university is research-led because you learn about cutting-edge discoveries and discover how to do research for yourself. This is perhaps the most valuable skill you will gain from your history degree because it brings together all of the other skills, knowledge and habits of historical thinking and acting that you have cultivated during your time at university. Importantly, while you might do this with the support and guidance of a supervisor or module leader, a dissertation or extended essay is an independent piece of work that you have designed and executed by yourself. Good luck!