Web Research
for Historians

A Course by Kevin Linch, University of Leeds

Contents

This resource is a series of learning materials and exercises which guide students through the process of finding material online, evaluating it, developing a project based on electronic resources, and publishing this project online.

They were developed by Kevin Linch for students of the University of Leeds. Internal links and references to the University of Leeds have been removed. References to your home institution's internal resources may be inserted where appropriate.

The package is divided into four units:

- Researching on the Web

- Research Sources

- Developing your Research Project

- Writing for the Web

Each contains advice and activities for students learning to research and publish online.

These units are followed by "Let's go: A Step-by-step Guide to Completing your Project", which helps students put what they have learned into practice.

Researching on the Web

Most people already think they can research quickly and easily online. This is true, to some extent, but historians need to be careful and thorough if their work is to be taken seriously.

This section helps your research to get off on the right foot by suggesting specific research tools and techniques for historians to use the web. It also encourages you to judge, evaluate and question your research and gives examples of good and bad practice.

Research Tools

People often make some common mistakes when they search the Internet:

- They don't have a good search strategy
- They don't use the best search tool/s for the job
- They don't choose the best keywords to search on

It is particularly important that historians get these basics right. A quick review of the wealth of information available on the web from the primary sources and secondary sources available should be enough to convince you that it is a matter of quality over quantity!

There are many different types of Internet search tools such as search engines, Web directories and more specialist search tools. Have a look Searching for Information: An Advanced Guide (Intute) at for advice on search strategies. Perhaps the best-known search engine is Google.

Search Engines

Search engines work by sending out special Web-harvesting software to websites around the world to create a huge index that lets you search billions Web pages. They are useful if you want to find a very precise piece of information and of course cover just about every subject under the sun. The use of inverted commas around key search words or phrases ensures that exact matches only are found - whilst an advanced Google search allows you to search with different options such as all of the words in your search, with the exact phrase, with at least one of the words or without the words.

Google scholar is particularly useful for historians. Google Scholar provides a simple way to broadly search for scholarly literature. You can search across many disciplines and sources including: peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, abstracts and articles, from academic publishers, professional societies, preprint repositories, universities and other scholarly organisations. The specialist search engine aims to help you identify the most relevant research across the world of scholarly research. It aims to sort articles by weighing the full text of each article, the author, the publication in which the article appears, and how often the piece has been cited in other scholarly literature. The most relevant results will always appear on the first page.

Web Directories

Web directories aim to help you look through (or browse) many thousands of Websites under a series of subject headings. They specialise in linking to other web sites and categorizing those links. A web directory is not a search engine, and does not display lists of web pages based on keywords, instead it lists web sites by category and subcategory. The categorization is usually based on the whole web site, rather than one page or a set of keywords, and sites are often limited to inclusion in only one or two categories. Web directories often allow site owners to directly submit their site for inclusion, and have editors review submissions for fitness. Well know examples include Yahoo and DMOZ Open Directory

Specialist Internet Search Tools

Specialist Internet search tools aim to help a particular audience find high quality Websites for their particular needs. They are often created by specialist organisations such as educational or professional organisations who employ qualified subject experts to select and organise Websites under subject headings, and write objective descriptions of the sites.

Have a look at some of these examples:

Intute - an Internet search service run specifically to help students and staff in UK universities and colleges find educational and research materials on the Internet. Intute is run by a national network of university researchers and librarians. The place to look for History Websites is Intute: Arts and Humanities.

History On-Line - a searchable catalogue of history resources including Websites. It is produced by the Institute of Historical Research to support teaching and learning in history.

JSTOR – which aims to create and maintain a trusted archive of scholarly journals, and to provide access to these journals as widely as possible. JSTOR offers researchers the ability to retrieve high-resolution, scanned images of journal issues and pages as they were originally designed, printed, and illustrated.

History Compass – which publishes peer-reviewed surveys of important historical research and current thinking.

WorldCat – which bills itself as the world's largest network of library content and services - is dedicated to providing access to those resources on the Web.

Information Storage Tools

With so much out there on the web, you need somewhere to store what you find that is easily accessible and navigable.

Social Bookmarking

Social Bookmarking tools are systems for sharing bookmarks and lists of literature. When discovering a bookmark or a publication on the web, you can store it on the server which also allows you to add tags to your entry to retrieve it more easily. This is very similar to the bookmarks / favourites that you store within your browser and allows you to access your data from wherever you are. You can search them to see what other people are bookmarking. CiteuLike is the social bookmarking tool we'll be using in this module.

This short video explains a bit more about social bookmarking

Judge, Evaluate, Question

The Web has changed the way historians carry out their research and present their findings. It's quicker and easier than ever before to do an initial amount of research, from both primary and secondary resources. So the need judge, evaluate and question those sources is imperative.

But how do you do this? What is objective and based on facts, and what is subjective / opinion based or downright untrue?

In principle, evaluating Web sources of information is the same as any other source of information such as a journal or book. Always appraise a source by first examining the bibliographic information. Ask yourself:

- What are the author's credentials?
- What are the website's credentials?
- Is the author / website likely to have an axe to grind?
- Has your tutor mentioned this website or author?
- Is the source website covered in the Primary sources and Secondary sources section?
- Have you seen the author's name in other bibliographies?
- Is the author associated with a reputable institution or organisation?
- When was the source published?

Note the publisher. If the source is published by a university press, it is likely to be scholarly. Although the fact that the publisher is reputable does not necessarily guarantee quality, it does show that the publisher may have high regard for the source being published.

Think, too, about the intended audience. What type of audience is the author addressing? Is the publication aimed at a specialised or a general audience? Is this source too basic, too detailed, too advanced, or just right for you're the job at hand?

Objective Reasoning

Is the information covered fact, opinion, or propaganda? Is it derived from Primary sources and Secondary sources? It's not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Be careful; skilled writers can make you think their interpretations are facts.

Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence? Assumptions should always be reasonable and based on factual data.

Are the ideas and arguments advanced more or less in line with other works you have read on the same topic? The more radically an author departs from the views of others in the same field, the more carefully and critically you should scrutinize his or her ideas.

Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-arousing words and bias? Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? Does it extensively or marginally cover your topic? You should explore enough Web sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.

Web-specific considerations:

When thinking specifically about information in relation to the Web *only*, ask yourself:

- What can the URL tell you?
- Who wrote the page? Is s/he, or the institution a qualified authority?
- Is it dated?
- Is any source information cited authentic?
- Does the website have overall integrity and reliability as a reliable source?
- Is it objective?

Critique

In the same way that editing someone else's work is easier than editing your own, so doing a critique of someone else's work is also easier from an academic viewpoint.

However, if you don't have the luxury of getting someone else to do an objective critique of your work, come back to your own work after a good interval and perform your own objective critique. This is similar to the editing section, though here we are more interested in *content* than style.

Be objectively critical of your work. How robust would your case be to a fellow historian with an alternative viewpoint?

Do you feel you could defend your Web sources in terms of their professionalism, authenticity, correctness and objectivity?

Have you truly considered all aspects of your project – including all relevant Primary sources and Secondary sources?

Have you presented all sides of the argument accurately using trustworthy sources?

Consider how your work would be viewed by your historian peers in relation to content, organisation, style, and correctness.

Imagine yourself before a panel of eminent historians defending your approach and conclusions. Does your project stand up to that level of scrutiny?

"The good, the bad & the ugly"

Here's where we have a bit of fun and look at some examples of good, bad and downright ugly examples of Web-based historical research. The names have been changed to protect the innocent!

The good

Olive is a Leeds undergraduate studying history. Her extremely munificent course tutors encourage her to use the Internet to help her study, but make it clear that she must be able to tell whether Web resources are authoritative before she uses them.

Olive's used the university library to access academic journals from her reading list, and her department has made many of her course materials available online.

She uses many reputable Primary and Secondary Web resources that have been reviewed and ratified by academic users. She came up with these following a detailed search plan and built an excellent bibliography accordingly. She used many of the websites mentioned in the Primary sources, Secondary sources, Build a bibliography and Research tools sections to do this.

She challenged her own information and conclusions and tempered her work accordingly.

She read the Writing for the Web section and took on board the principles therein to find her own style and plan a logical and clear structure for her project – which she tested with peers and honed accordingly.

Safe in the knowledge that it's a job well done – she's able to enjoy a guilt-free night out to celebrate!

The bad

Dipak has decided he knows all about the Web and Web-based research. He's spent half his life on the Internet and doesn't really need to go through all this stuff teaching granny to suck eggs! He can cut straight to the chase and get on with his project. A few [Google Scholar](#) searches using exact phrase matches via inverted commas and he's away.

But half way through his project he realises that – although he's found some good sources of information – it took him a lot longer than he thought. Having glimpsed some of his fellow students' work, he also realises that theirs is a lot shorter and punchier and generally more engaging. His is more of a diatribe and lacks logical structure.

Dipak was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material he came across on the Web and didn't realise that "less is more" when it comes to writing for the Web and laying the content out logically.

Dipak's fellow students have a wealth of better-referenced material than his, which is also presented in a far more navigable way. If the reader doesn't want to trawl through the main content, s/he doesn't have to, but it's clearly there. Dipak's work goes on for page after page and clearly hasn't been thoroughly read. A few American spellings here and there, a great deal of repetition across sections, some dodgy biased sources and a few notable omissions of the world's most eminent historians on his chosen subject combine to make it a pretty poor effort overall!

The ugly

Kevin has left his project until a fortnight after the due date, citing illness, the death of the family dog and the theft of his laptop as reasons. The reality is somewhat different: Constant procrastination coupled with the odd "jar" and a preference for doing *anything* but the work at hand have combined to cause him to finally panic. He tried for another stay of execution due to a bout of amnesia following a knock on the head but - alas! – his tutor wasn't having any of it.

But it's ok, he can use plenty of coffee, stay up all night and with Google, Google Scholar and some deft cutting, pasting and light editing he can busk it!

Sadly not. The reality is that a lack of robust research shines through the work and is plainly visible to anyone with half a brain – or even a lecturer well-used to the ruses and shortcuts s/he sees year in year out! The eventual project makes Dipak's work look like AJP Taylor!

Researching on the Web: Exercise

Devise a search strategy of your choice of topic, for example:
- On a subject your are studying in a another module
- A topic you are thinking of looking at for this project
- Anything else historical you might be interested in

Use the Research Tools you have learnt about.

Remember to have a look at the help pages / search tutorials for these sites about advanced searches, etc.

Task: Searching & critiquing the web

Post in the course group blog

Discuss your method:

- What you were searching for

- The results obtained from the different search engines / sites (you can link to the search results)

- An analysis of the results from the different search engines – in what ways were they different?

Discuss your results:

- Choose a two or more websites from you search results and critique them.

This is the end of this unit.

Research Sources

The Internet offers unprecedented access to both primary and secondary research for historians.

This section takes you through some of the best Websites for historians – particularly as logical starting points / routes to further research.

You will find out about the range and type of research material that can be found online, and ideas for how you can use it in studying, teaching and research.

Primary Sources

Primary sources are the basis of true historical research.

Primary sources are original records created at the time historical events occurred or well after events in the form of memoirs and oral histories. They may include census material, letters, diaries, journals, newspapers, speeches, interviews, memoirs, documents produced by public bodies, photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures or video recordings, research data, and objects or artefacts such as works of art or ancient roads, buildings, tools, and weapons.

These primary sources serve as the raw material to interpret the past, and they provide the raw materials necessary for historical research.

Original historic documents are often fragile and difficult to access. The Internet provides unprecedented access to these records in a safe format and an ever-increasing amount of information is coming onto the worldwide Web as government agencies, academics and institutions publish these original source materials for the world to share.

Reality check

It's important to make sure that primary sources are accurate and come from an authoritative source. The list of authoritative sources is growing almost daily. Have a look at these *few* examples:

British History Online is a digital library containing some of the core printed primary and secondary sources for the medieval and modern history of the British Isles. Created by the Institute of Historical Research and the History of Parliament Trust, it aims to support academic and personal users around the world in their learning, teaching and research.

Collect Britain showcases thousands of items from the British Library. You can browse collections, tours and exhibitions, or search the site in many different ways. The images can be searched, or browsed by theme.

British Pathe is one of the oldest media companies in the world. By 1910, the company was producing its famous bi-weekly newsreel the Pathe Gazette. By the time Pathe finally stopped producing the cinema newsreel in 1970 the company had accumulated 3,500 hours of filmed history amounting to over 90,000 individual items. This is now available on the Web. All professional usages require a licence fee though free previews are available to residents of the British Isles.

Moving Here explores, records and illustrates why people came to England over the last 200 years and what their experiences were and continue to be. It offers free access, for personal and educational use, to an online catalogue of versions of original material related to migration history from local, regional and national archives, libraries and museums.

CELT is an online resource for Irish history, literature and politics. It has a searchable online textbase consisting of 935 contemporary and historical documents from many areas, including literature and the other arts.

Valley of the Shadow is a digital archive of primary sources that document the lives of people in Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, during the era of the American Civil War. You can explore thousands of original documents that allow you to see what life was like during the Civil War including letters and diaries, census and government records, newspapers and speeches, all of which record different aspects of daily life in these two counties at the time of the Civil War.

For signposting to various American primary sources, go to the American Library Association's Reference & User Services Association's history section: "Using Primary Sources on the Web."

The Henry III Fine Rolls Project offers a window into English history between 1216 and 1272 during which time the English Royal Chancery recorded its business on a series of "rolls" during the reign of Henry III. The project makes the rolls freely available in English translation with a sophisticated electronic search engine.

The 1901 Census online allows users to search archives on over 400 million people living in England and Wales between 1841-1901 and view images of the original documents.

200 years of the census - a UK Government National statistics Website looks at how and why the census was created during the Industrial Revolution, the Victorian Era, two World Wars, post-war, and modern day Britain.

Atlantic Canada Virtual Archives – a collection of digitised letters and manuscripts, particularly from the late Eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, relating to New Brunswick in Canada. A good example of the burgeoning online archives / digitisation projects being conducted by Universities.

Online Sources at from the University Library

Many online sources require a subscription

Early English Books Online (EBBO) contains digital images of nearly every work printed in the British Isles and North America between 1473 and 1700, amounting to about 100,000 works. It includes famous works by Shakespeare, covers the Reformation, the Jacobean era, and the English Civil War, with material such as royal proclamations, military, legal and other public documents, and provides material on a wealth of social issues such as calendars, literature, and popular pamphlets.

Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) follows on from EBBO and covers the Eighteenth Century, hosting 138,000 different titles printed in Britain between 1701 and 1800 and many important works published in North America. It provides contemporary British views on some of the great events in British History, such as the birth of the industrial revolution, the rise of the British Empire, the Enlightenment, and the American and French Revolutions.

House of Commons Parliamentary Papers hosts all House of Commons bills (legislation before it becomes law), records of speeches, and papers and is fully searchable and indexed, amounting to 200,000 documents. This resource covers the period between 1688 and 2003/04 and continues to be updates annually.

Times Digital Archive captures the entire newspaper from 1785-1985 and provides contemporary comments on most of the events in modern history. It can be searched for individual articles and it already subdivided into categories such as advertising, business, commentary and news.

Empire Online selects together material from libraries and archives all over the world and arranges them around thematic essays and collections of documents. It covers the period from 1492 to the present day and presents material on cultural contact, race, class, and imperialism.

Women & Social Movements in the United States 1600-2000 makes available more than 2,400 selected documents, alongside interpretative essays with a collection of documents, much like Empire Online. It provides material on equal rights, civil liberties, anti-slavery movements, and female societies. As such, it covers all aspects of history, social, economic, and political, as well as gender (of course!).

The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography includes the biographies of 56,000 people who shaped the history of the British Isles and beyond, from the earliest times to the year 2003. It includes both free and paid-for content. A wide selection of biographies and feature articles are available free of charge. The resource is also available through institutional and public library terminals in the UK.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are accounts written after-the-fact with the benefit of hindsight. They are interpretations and evaluations of primary sources. Secondary sources are not evidence, but rather commentary on and discussion of evidence and include: Biographies; Commentaries; Dissertations; Indexes; Abstracts ; Journal Articles ; andEssays and all other collections and interpretations of primary data.

As the number of secondary sources published on the Internet grows every day, so the wealth of material for further interpretation reaches never before dreamed of volumes - but the objective filtering required becomes increasingly difficult with that increasing volume.

It is easy to find secondary information on the Web. The danger is that it's too easy. Historians need to look carefully at the *sources* of those secondary sources. Academic journals publish original research that has been peer-reviewed, but this is often not the case for material published on other Web pages.

Here are a few specific ideas for reputable sources for you to explore:

University libraries often have subscriptions to some of the most useful journals, whilst some journals are fully electronic and are often subscription-based. Oxford University Library Services has a comprehensive list of Libraries associated with the University of Oxford.

The Directory of Open Access Journals covers free, full text, quality controlled scientific and scholarly journals. It aims to cover all subjects and languages and links to many freely available online journals. The History and Archaeology section is of most interest to historians.

Reviews in History is an e-journal which publishes reviews and reappraisals of significant work in all fields of historical interest. To date, it has published over 500 reviews. New reviews appear regularly. It includes reviews of greater length than those usually found in scholarly journals (2000–3000 words) with free access to reviews, and free email alerts with links to the latest reviews. Authors and editors have the right of reply and reviews are undertaken by leading scholars.

The Medieval Review publishes reviews of current work in all areas of Medieval Studies, a field it interprets as broadly as possible. It is freely available and includes research articles, review articles, and book reviews.

Medical History is a refereed journal devoted to all aspects of the history of medicine and health, with the goal of broadening and deepening the understanding of the field, in the widest sense, by historical studies of the highest quality. It is also the journal of the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health.

An increasing number of universities have begun to make articles written by members of staff freely available online via Institutional E-print Archives. 'E-prints' are electronic copies of academic research papers which may take the form of 'pre-prints' (papers before they have been refereed) or 'post-prints' (after they have been refereed). They may be journal articles, conference papers, book chapters or any other form of research output. An 'e-print archive' is simply an online repository of these materials. E-print archives are normally made freely available on the Web with the aim of ensuring the widest possible readership.

There are almost countless examples of secondary resources available online. The need to judge, evaluate and question these sources is imperative.

Web Gateways

Gateways or portals provide subject specific access to the Internet. Some good examples for historians are:

OAIster - a free catalogue of digital resources from a wide variety of institutions. It allows users to search within the sites it lists, so that you can go directly to the specific resource that is relevant for your research. OAIster can be searched by Title, Author/Creator, Subject, Language or Entire Record. Searches can also be limited by resource type (text, image, audio, video, dataset) and sorted by title, author, date and hit frequency.

The Institute of Historical Research (IHR) which has a history gateway and server which aims to promote high quality resources for the learning and teaching of history for the UK further and higher education community. It includes information about online resources for historians and the history profession (books, journal articles, current research and teaching, lecturers and seminars).

Intute: Arts and Humanities - a large catalogue of reviewed and annotated links. New links are added on a weekly basis, and the site lists several thousand historical resources.

Best of History Websites - a portal that contains annotated links to over 1,000 history websites and online teaching resources.

Early Modern Resources - a gateway for all those interested in finding electronic resources relating to the early modern period in history.

Victoria Research Web - dedicated to the study of 19th century Britain, and to aiding researchers, teachers, and students in their investigations of all aspects of the period.

The ORB (the Online Reference Book for Medieval Studies) - a site aimed at medieval studies for the non-specialist.

H-Net – an international interdisciplinary organisation of scholars and teachers dedicated to developing the educational potential of the Internet. H-Net publishes peer-reviewed essays, multimedia materials, and discussion for colleagues and the interested public.

EH.NET - an economic history website with mailing lists that provides resources and promotes communication among scholars in economic history and related fields. EH.Net is supported by the Economic History Association (American).

World Lecture Hall provides links to free online course materials. You can find information on history courses by browsing the subject area.

Museums, Libraries and Archives

Museums, libraries and archives' websites can be used to find information about their collections / specialist areas of interest:

A2A is a database containing catalogues describing archives held locally in England and Wales and dating from the eighth century to the present day. It lists millions of records, which can be searched.

Archives Hub provides a similar service for the archival holdings of British colleges and universities. It is a single point of access to archives held in UK repositories. At present these are primarily at collection-level, although complete catalogue descriptions are provided where they are available. The Archives Hub forms one part of the UK's National Archives Network, alongside related networking projects.

The National Register of Archives contains information on the nature and location of manuscripts and historical records that relate to British history.

The British Library holds over 13 million books, 920,000 journal and newspaper titles, 57 million patents and 3 million sound recordings.

National Union Catalogue of MS Collections is a free-of-charge co-operative cataloguing programme operated by the American Library of Congress which allows the user to search for manuscripts in archives in the USA and its territories.

The National Archives is the official archive for England, Wales and the central UK government, containing 900 years of history from Domesday Book to the present, with records ranging from parchment and paper scrolls through to recently created digital files and archived websites. Increasingly, these records are being put online, making them universally accessible. You can search the catalogue, view online exhibitions, or download items.

The Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick holds nationally important archives for the study of social, economic and political history, mainly from the mid 19th century onwards. The archives have been designated as an "outstanding collection" by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. Its Website includes a summary guide to the Centre's archival collections, as well as access and other information.

Major libraries hold manuscripts and other archival items in addition to their collections, often unique, of printed primary and secondary material. Most libraries make versions of their catalogues available to search online, and some present digital editions of part of their collections.

National Library of Scotland and National Library of Wales websites provide access to their library catalogues including millions of books, maps, manuscripts, as well as a range of other resources for readers and learners, and online exhibitions and digitised material.

Other museum sites also provide a wealth of information and access to catalogues or introductions to their collections, and images of specific historical items.

Historical Organisations

Academic / scholarly societies and other organisations can be useful places to look for historical information.

The Historical Association aims to bring together people of all communities who have an interest in the past. It promotes and supports the study and teaching of history at all levels: teacher, student, amateur and professional.

The American Historical Association is the professional organisation and advocate for historians in the USA. It promotes historical studies, the collection and preservation of historical documents and artefacts and provides a variety of information including links to its journal and newsletter.

Special interest groups and societies can be useful for researchers interested in particular fields. The amount of information made available online varies - some publish articles and journals on their Web pages, while others list brief information about their activities.

The Scholarly Societies Project catalogues and links to Websites belonging to scholarly societies around the world. The history section includes a useful set of guidelines to determine whether to include resources.

Genuki is the genealogical information service for Britain and Ireland. It is a vast resource and provides access to a wealth of material for researchers and students.

The Women's History Network promotes the study of and research into women's history at all educational levels.

The Local History Directory provides links and information to history groups and societies throughout the UK.

Research Centres

Research centres and research projects which are usually based at universities showcase some of the most up-to-date and exciting online historical research work.

A few good examples are:

The Centre for Metropolitan History promotes the study and wide appreciation of London's character and development from its beginnings to the present day, and is concerned to set the history of London in the wider context provided by knowledge of other metropolises.

The Centre for Editing Lives and Letters based at Queen Mary, University of London, develops archive-based research projects of relevance to the period 1500 - 1800. It publishes collections of correspondence, lives and works.

Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England is a database which aims to cover all of the recorded inhabitants of England from the late sixth to the end of the eleventh century. It is based on a systematic examination of the available written sources for the period, including chronicles, saints' lives, charters, libri vitae, inscriptions, and coins.

Clergy of the Church of England Database aims to create a relational database documenting the careers of all Church of England clergymen between 1540 and 1835. The website not only gives access to the database, but also provides a range of supporting materials about the Church and its clergy.

A Vision of Britain includes maps, statistical trends and historical descriptions of the 1801-2001 period. It provides an easy way in to the data assembled by the Historical GIS project . The site allows users to access historical information on British places, and can be easily searched by current postcode.

The Centre for Research into Freemasonry provides information and resources to do with the study of the history of freemasonry, including research papers and audio files of seminars.

Research Sources Exercise

As you can see, there is an enormous amount of material out there that can be used for historical research, so as well as narrowing it down by evaluating it, we can also narrow it down by what interests you.

This is the first stage of defining a research project.

Research Sources Exercise: Selecting Resources

This task is a 'practice' for when you go through the process more formally as part of defining your research topic. You can use this information later on, but you don't have to.

Think about a topic:

- What periods of history covered by the online resources have you studied before?

- Of these periods, which ones interested you?

Think about an approach:

- What 'type' of History have you studied before (political, social, economic, cultural, gender, etc), and which ones interest you?

- What themes, issues are you interested in?

Post in the course group blog:

Write up your final thoughts about a topic and an approach. From this list, what would be suitable resources, both primary and secondary, to use to research this?

Remember to links to sources, websites, and relevant searches from libraries, etc.

This is the end of this unit.

Developing your Research Project

Researching a project is quite a big task, and it is important to get it right from the start. This section gets you to think about the all important first parts – what you are going to do and what has been done already – and does this in two parts:

- Refining your ideas for the topic

- Building a bibliography of suitable materials

These two parts are interrelated: finding suitable materials will help you refine your ideas, and your ideas will help refine what materials to look for and use.

Developing the project, and creating the project proposal & bibliography that are submitted in week 6 is a process of refining – finding out what is possible, what is plausible, what interests you, and what you will be able to complete in the timescales.

Defining a Research Topic

In the last set of learning materials you thought about a research topic and selected material for it. For the project proposal & bibliography you will need to do the same thing, but in more detail.

There are several things you need to consider for your project, including:

- Your personal interests

- The historical point to your website

- The availability of material

- Skills and methods

- What you can achieve

Personal Interest

Personal interest in the topic will help you complete your website and help you attain good marks. Unless you are interested in the topic, it will be hard to find the motivation to work on your project throughout this semester.

From the list of online primary sources that you have already looked at, consider the following:

Think about a topic:

- What material have you come across that you are interested in?

- Does it link to periods you have studied before or you are studying, or you would like to study in the future?

(The project doesn't have to relate to something you are studying or have studied before, but it may help keep you motivated if it is something that you feel connected to).

Think about an approach:

- What 'type' of History website could be written using these materials - political, social, economic, cultural, gender, etc?

- What themes or issues are you interested in?

Historical Interest

Your website has to have a historical point to it, but what does this mean?

Very generally, history is about interpretation and analysis of events, and historical knowledge is advanced by modifying or challenging existing interpretations.

Given the size of your website, you do need to consider what you can achieve, but nevertheless by using online sources and exploring existing debates your website should be able to present material and analysis that enhances historical knowledge of a topic, theme, or debate.

You can do this in several ways:

- **Look at an unstudied topic which impacts on existing ideas**
  Here you could present an argument and refer to sources on a theme or issue in history that have not been covered much by historians so far. As you build your bibliography for a topic, you may find that little has been written about it. Don't be worried, this is a good thing!

- **Exploit new sources for old problems**
  The availability of online sources means that we can now look at old problems with more easily available material. You could take an event, person, or theme, and use online sources to shed new light on the history of it. You may find a lot when your build your bibliography, but careful attention to their sources will show you what has been used before and what new material you can bring to the debate.

- **Exploit existing sources in new ways**
  Online sources allow you to approach sources in completely new ways using search technology. You can, for example, search for keywords and explore how many times words or phrases were used in a particular source; track changes in the meaning of phrases; or perform complex searches to reveal relationships and patterns.

- **Open up a new topic of study**
  The availability of online materials and huge databases mean that new topics for study are much more easily identified and more easily studied.

These four are by no means distinct, and you may find that your project is a combination of a few of these historical objectives.

You will probably need to go through these questions alongside building your bibliography, which will help you identify what you are doing that will add to historical knowledge.

Availability of Material

From your exploration of the online primary sources, you should already have a good idea about what material is available to you.

Having thought about your topic and the historical point to your project, it is worth double checking that the sources available to you allow you to achieve what you want in the project.

In some cases, there will be limitations to what you can do with the online primary sources, and sometime a good topic will be unfeasible because the sources you need to address the issues are not available to you. In these cases, think about what you can do with the sources and modify your project accordingly.

Skills and Method

Sometimes the topic you have chosen will require a set of unusual skills, or skills that you do not possess already. In defining your research project you should ask the following questions:

- Will you require special skills to tackle, process or present your material: e.g. Language, palaeography, computing or statistical skills, or to use or apply new methods to the study of your chosen materials?
- If you answer yes to the above question, how much training will you need to acquire / new skills / methods, and where and when will you gain them?

Using or developing such skills may have additional benefits, for example by providing you with examples for your CV or for interviews, and your ability to undertake research in your dissertation in your final year.

What you can Achieve

It is vital that your topic is of a suitable scope to research and write up within a semester, while taking a third of your work time, and within the word limit.

You should consider two things. **First**, is the topic as you have defined it able to be delivered in a 3,000 word website (i.e. 50% more than a standard level two essay); and **second** are the sources manageable enough to treat the topic adequately within this word limit.

You should consider the following questions:

- Is the scope of the topic appropriate to a 3,000 word assignment, or does it need to be honed down in some way (or in rare cases, expanded).
- How extensive / comprehensive are the online primary sources?
- If they are too extensive, can you sample them or prioritise which ones you will use?
- How extensive / comprehensive is the secondary literature? Again, if the literature is large, how are you going to prioritise your reading?

This is a very important part of managing your project, and you will have the chance to discuss in further in the workshop for this set of learning materials.

Defining a topic: Blog Exercise

Having gone through the five main factors in shaping your project, you need to start honing this down to a project.

In your course blog, outline a topic and address each of the issues discussed in this unit:

- your personal interests
- the historical point to your website
- the availability of material
- skills and methods
- what you can achieve

You may find it useful to have an initial post, followed by an exploration of the primary and secondary sources collecting the information in CiteULike, which informs a second, refined topic outline in another post and includes the link to your resources.

At the moment, you may find that you have more questions than answers! Be clear about identifying them in your blog. This will allow you to focus on them in the workshop and supervision meetings.

You also might like to comment on other students' blog if they have the same questions, or you may even have a solution to their questions.

Build a Bibliography

Bibliographies and indexes are valuable tools for finding primary and secondary printed historical material in libraries. Building the right bibliography can be a difficult and time-consuming task given the huge wealth of historical information freely available online.

The trick is in sorting wheat from chaff and, thankfully, there are some excellent bibliographical resources are available freely online, in addition to those listed under primary sources and secondary sources including:

The RHS Bibliography is an authoritative guide to what has been written about British and Irish history from the Roman period to the present day. The bibliography is hosted by the Institute of Historical Research, which is part of the University of London. It includes almost 433,000 entries and is updated three times a year. There are separate records for articles in journals and in collections of essays, as well as for books; 590 journals are searched for relevant material. The site allows access to data from Irish History Online and from London's Past Online. You can search by keyword, by author, title, journal or series, date of publication, subject and period covered. The bibliography has been compiled with the help of academic historians and no subscription is required. The site links to the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography and the National Register of Archives where relevant, and to library catalogues.

ABC-CLIO History Online is an American reference source publisher. This site offers details on two of its main bibliographic publications, Historical Abstracts and America: History and Life, together forming a huge history database. The databases are available by subscription, but sample content can be reviewed free of charge. A site search brings up lists of historical academic articles on any given topic in a clear, index-card format and members of the academic editorial and advisory boards are listed. Historical Abstracts covers history of the world from 1450 to the present day, excluding the USA and Canada. It is updated monthly and includes concise abstracts of journal articles with over 600,000 entries currently available; 20,000 new entries are added each year.

America: History and Life offers historical coverage of the United States and Canada from prehistory to the present. The database includes over 530,000 bibliographic entries. Additional bibliographical entries are constantly added. The articles are abstracted by an experienced group of abstracters, most of who are historians

The SciPer Index - Science in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical - provides a scholarly synopsis of the material relating to science, technology, and medicine appearing in sixteen general periodicals published in Britain between 1800 and 1900. With entries describing around 7,500 articles (which will double to more than 15,000 when complete), and with references to over 5,500 individuals, 2,000 publications, and 1,000 institutions, it provides an invaluable research tool for people interested in the representation of science and in the interpenetration of science and literature in nineteenth-century Britain, as well as for students of the period more generally.

Britannia History includes easy to reference information on all aspects and periods of British history from the earliest times to the present day, billing itself as "The internet's most comprehensive treatment of the Times, Places, Events and People of British History."

Build a Bibliography Exercise

[CiteULike](#) is a system for sharing bookmarks and lists of literature. When discovering a bookmark or a publication on the web, you can store it on the CiteULike server which also allows you to add tags to your entry to retrieve it more easily. This is very similar to the bookmarks / favourites that you store within your browser and allows you to access your data from wherever you are.

Task: Use [CiteULike](#) to collect both primary and second material for your project. Provide a link to your CiteULike in your blog

Your Project Proposal

Having completed the two tasks of blogging about a research topic and creating a bibliography using CiteULike, you are well on your way to having a project proposal.

As mentioned at the start, you may need to do several iterations of looking at sources, your ideas, and looking at what else has been done before you get to the project proposal you submit for assessment. Even after this, your project can still change, but each time it does you should have a much better idea of what you are doing and how you are going to do it. You can also see how your ideas have developed by looking at your previous blog entries.

This is the end of this unit.

Writing for the Web

This section of the Website is all about writing for the Web. The information in this section is not concerned directly with the study of history so much as approaching a Web-based project correctly. It includes a wealth of information on presenting your content to best effect, getting it read, and making it interesting to your target audience. It also introduces you copyright and things you need to consider if you are going to use images or other media. Although written specifically from an undergraduate historian's perspective, the same basic principles apply to creating Web-based material in any environment.

Effective Writing for the Web

When a visitor finds his/her way to a Website looking for information, it is fundamentally different to other forms of communication in a number of ways
Research has shown that Internet users scan pages for key words rather than read word for word. Research has also shown that Internet users can waste over an hour a day due to poorly designed sites as they can't find what they are looking for.

Web content needs to be written differently from any other form of written communication. Attention spans are brief!

Remember:

- Always use clear, [plain English](#)*

- Be concise

- Keep paragraphs short

- Use sub headings to help scan reading

- Using bullet points to break up text and convey key information

Imagine you're talking to your audience when writing. A useful tip is to imagine you're writing for an individual who fits the profile of your intended audience

Before you begin, think about what your key messages really are. These should be summarised near the top of your work for ease of reference and scanning.

Summarise your main points in the first paragraph. If the reader really wants to get into the detail, s/he can.

The [Plain English Campaign](#) has free advice on how to write in plain English [here](#) (pdf).

Editing

Editing Web content is all about creating the right visual impression. Of course, it is vital to get your writing for the Web skills right, but once you've mastered the content, it's all about clarity of presentation. Don't confuse this with graphics / pictures / illustrations etc. It's the *overall* visual impression we're really interested in – and some of the best Websites on the Internet have little else but words.

Editing visually is more difficult when you're presenting historical research information which is, essentially, a word-based serious academic study. It is, nevertheless, absolutely vital that you get this right in the interests of usability.

You're vying for your visitors' attention. Web readers want to see what the article or site is about quickly and easily. If they can't figure it out right away, they'll go elsewhere.

A few things to bear in mind:

Develop your own style and stick to it throughout your project. In this context, "style" includes your own style of writing as well as more obvious things like consistent font type and size.

Avoid clutter. Don't be tempted to fill your Web pages with needless information. Include only what is important with clear signposts to other areas of more detailed information

Getting someone else to be your sub editor–cum–proof reader is a good trick. Another person sees something you've been working on for a long time very differently. Listen to their comments; they're more objective than your own thoughts at this stage. Similarly, a really useful trick is to leave your work for a while. Come back to it afresh and you see it through a new pair of eyes. Sometimes, you'll wonder what you meant when you wrote XYZ… Objectivity and freshness is crucial.

"Horses for Courses" - Writing for your Audience

Writing with your audience in mind may sound obvious. We all write different styles from a formal essay to a letter to a member if the family in the appropriate style – unless you have very staid relations anyway!

But it's absolutely *vital* to get this right when writing Web content. Unless your reader *has* to read your content for some reason – like a hapless lecturer marking your research, for example! – you will lose your targets immediately if the style isn't right.

How much attention do you honestly give to a Website that comes across as patronising, or overly complex, or too obviously commercial, for example – unless you really can only get the information you seek from that one site?

The style has to be right for the intended audience.

Of course, if you're writing a serious academic Website, then the tone must be appropriate. That doesn't mean it shouldn't be interesting and perhaps even entertaining.

Thinking about your audience differently can improve your writing, particularly in how clearly you express your argument. The clearer your points are, the more likely you are to be "heard" – this is especially true on the Web.

 Before you begin writing, take some time to consider who your audience is and what they want from you. Use the following questions to help decide:

- Who is your audience?
- How many audiences do you have? List them.
- What does your audience need?
- What do they want?
- What is most important to them?
- What are they least likely to care about?
- How might you organise your Website in a way that will be best for your audience?
- What do you have to say or what are you doing in your research that might surprise / particularly interest your audience?
- What do you want your audience to think, learn, or assume about you?
- What impression do you want your writing or your research to convey?

Think about design of your site not for its own sake, or what you like, but how it will help your audience's usability. Your audience is looking for information quickly and clearly.

Put yourself in the place of your readers. What makes your content different, unique or useful compared to the alternatives for your particular audience. Identify what makes you and/or your Website truly special. Focus on this and communicate it succinctly.

Exercise: Describe the potential audiences for your website in the course blog

Usability

It is crucial that academic findings are presented logically on the Web to maximise usability.

Usability is about constructing your Website in such a way that your site users can find what they're looking for quickly and efficiently. Your Website has to be easy to navigate and logical / intuitive for your target audience.

As the Internet matures, people are getting increasingly used to seeing Websites presented in a certain way. For Websites intending to impart information to the user, a home page, a menu of main sections and then subsections are generally expected. Break these conventions and you may be left with a Website with poor usability and some dissatisfied site visitors. A certain level of learning has already gone into your Website from the user's viewpoint before s/he even opens it up.

Pages must download quickly. Usability studies have shown that 8.6 seconds is the maximum time Web users will wait for a page to download.

Test your usability on others. A little hands-on market research is essential to get the objective views of third parties who are drawn from your target audience.

A logical site structure, effective writing in a style that is right for the target audience will all help usability. Finally, don't be afraid to edit your site heavily if necessary in accordance with your straw poll research. Remember, the customer is king!

Copyright

One of the benefits of writing for the web is that you can use non-written mediums: things like pictures, sound clips, and videos which can enhance your webpages.

If you are considering using media from other sites then you must consider copyright.

Just like referencing in essays, copyright is about making sure that someone who created something is given the credit for it. The difference is that for material in the public domain or that we be presented in the public domain, as your websites will be, an author can decide that their intellectual property cannot be used elsewhere without their express permission.

This means that for any media that you are considering using you should check carefully the copyright restrictions on it. In most cases, you won't be able to use it without their permission and it is best to err on the side of caution.

How to deal with copyright issues

There are several ways you can deal with copyright issues:

- Utilise material available at copyright free sites (try searching 'copyright free images' in Google

- Look for statements on websites about its copyrights.

- Contact the owner of the material that you want to use. You should do this as early as possible

- Link to the media rather than hosting it on your webpage.

Images

If you want to use images in your website, you might find this online tutorial useful: [Intute - Image Searching](#)

Structure

The structure of your site is composed of the different sections of your Website and navigation within those sections. It is the framework that shapes your site and your navigation scheme.

Information Websites are usually composed of three main areas:

- The Home Page

- The Main Sections

- The Subsections

It's usually best to start with a Website outline - a written outline / family tree of the content of your Website. Even though you probably feel as if know every title and sentence on the Website you are creating, once a site is online it is very difficult to remember the actual order of things. This has to be logical. It is one of the main foundation stones of your entire project, so it's worth putting a lot of effort into getting this right and testing its logic on potential users before going further.

Having a Website outline helps provide a mental picture of the site, the sections, subsections and content pages. This will also serve as a valuable guide when you setup your navigation scheme. You will be able to better visualize the path that you wish your visitors to follow.

Exercise: for the workshop this week draw up website outline.

You can use mind mapping software, such as MindGenius available on cluster PCs, or a simple pen & paper!

This is the end of this unit.

Let's go:
A Step-by-step Guide to Completing your Project

You're ready to go having read and totally imbibed everything you need to know from the sections on Researching, Sources, and Writing right? Well, OK, if you're sure, but first ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you confident that, having read the other sections, you're now able to use the web to its best possible effect?

- Can you access the information you need to, quickly and effectively?

- Can you truly use and evaluate primary and secondary research sources?

- Can you create Web material that will really be read, clearly understood and which will stand up to academic scrutiny?

You can? Well let's go then. Here's a step-by-step guide to completing your project:

Defining the project

You will already have submitted a proposal and received feedback on it from your tutor, but don't be afraid to tweak it as you progress through researching and writing up your project.

Primary sources

This is, arguably, the single most important aspect of your entire project. The Web abounds with primary data – and no-one will ever have found, used and interpreted it in the way that you will. It's the primary sources that will truly set your project apart.

Secondary sources

Remember to research thoroughly to gain considered, objective views on all angles. The most important things to bear in mind during secondary research are:

- Be comprehensive across all good sources of information
- Present all views
- Reference all your sources
- Be objective in using your secondary sources; don't "cherry-pick"

Bibliography

Think of the bibliography as one of the main foundation stones to your entire project (along with primary research sources). Like any foundation – the more work you put into this stage of your project – the more robust it will be. Remember, your bibliography will be subject to academic scrutiny. If you don't get this stage right, it could negate the entire project.

Remember, as well, that the preparation of your bibliography is evaluated.

Project / Site Structure

Strangely, this is all too often the single most neglected area of Website design. It's particularly important to consider if you're trying to present a lot of information in a logical format that is clear for the user to be able to follow. It is aid that "the customer is king" and this is particularly true when it comes to academic site structure. To a large extent, it doesn't matter whether the information is clear and easy to use to *you* – the author; it's all about usability and on that score, only the end user/s matter. On this, ultimately, your work will be judged.

Of course, it's equally important to get the content right, but unless it's presented in a clear and easy-to-follow format, all the information you put into the different aspects of your research, bibliography, editing and writing is largely wasted.

Take the time to get it right – and test its usability on others before you start writing the content.

Effective writing

Effective writing of your project is just another way of saying that the communication needs to be right. You may have your ideas, your research, bibliography, and site structure *exactly* as you (or, to be accurate, your end-user...) wants it, but it's all to no avail unless your written work is clear.

Remember to try and use plain English. Plain English doesn't mean simple English – it means that the message of what you're e trying to convey is clear. You probably aren't the best judge of whether you have achieved true clarity; this is best left to others to judge. So, test your work on others:

-Does it make sense?
-Are your main messages clearly communicated?

Writing your project

Now the easy bit! You've decided what you're going to work on, done your research, built your biography, formed a logical site structure and are clear about your style of writing. And all these individual elements have stood the test of a straw poll of your target audience.

Edit / Test

After all the effort, you finally have a completed draft. Now comes the hard bit! Try it out on some willing and knowledgeable recipients for a bit of polite (hopefully!) and constructive criticism.

Make any amendments you see fit and then leave your project for a while, if time allows, before coming back t it and reading it afresh. Test all your hyperlinks, double-check your reference sources make any amendments you think necessary with you fresh look at it and, well, treat yourself to something, you've deserved it!