

MAKING A RESEARCH PLAN

Learn More

Guideline 4 (page 155) provides detailed advice about evaluating information you find in these and other sources.

Expertise in using research sources and methods is as important as expertise in any other writing activity.

- **Identify the sources and methods most likely to help you write an effective, reader-centered communication.** Consider the full range of information you must locate in order to assist and persuade your readers. Here are some strengths and weaknesses of several useful sources and methods:
 - **Books.** Broad coverage of established topics; often reviewed for accuracy in the publication process; quickly become out of date on rapidly developing topics.
 - **Research journals.** Up-to-date discussions that have been judged valid by specialists in the writer's field; often very sharply focused.
 - **Trade journals.** Solutions to practical problems encountered by many organizations in an industry or field; sometimes lack balance and depth.
 - **Popular periodicals.** General introductions to topics for nonspecialists; not generally considered authoritative on technical matters.
 - **Internet searches.** Very current information; quality can be difficult to assess.
 - **Interviews and surveys.** Opportunity to gather exactly the information you need in order to assist and persuade your readers; not suited to all topics.
 - **Specialized methods in your field.** Ideal for answering the questions you are learning to address through classes in your major.
 - **Your memory and creativity.** Invaluable resources; may need to be tested against other people's thoughts and experiences.
- **Consult general sources first.** By gaining a general view of your subject, you increase the ease with which you can locate, comprehend, and interpret the more detailed facts you are seeking. Useful general sources include encyclopedias, review articles that summarize research on a particular subject, and articles in popular magazines.
- **Conduct preliminary research when appropriate.** For example, before interviewing a technical specialist or upper-level manager, conduct the background research that will enable you to focus the interview exclusively on facts this person alone can supply. Similarly, before conducting a survey, determine what other surveys have learned and study the techniques they used.
- **Make a schedule.** Establish a deadline for completing all your research that leaves adequate time for you to draft and revise your communication. Then set dates for finishing the subparts of your research, remembering to complete general and preliminary research before proceeding with other sources and methods.
- **Study the research methods you are going to use.** In your schedule, include time to study research methods you haven't used before. Also, provide time to learn advanced techniques of methods, such as searching the Internet, whose basics you already know. The Writer's Reference Guide that follows this chapter provides detailed advice for skillfully using five research methods that are very helpful on the job.

While planning your research, you may find it helpful to use a planning guide like the one shown in Figure 6.1.

FIGURE 6.1 Planning Guide for Research

● To download a copy of this planning guide, go to www.thomsonedu.com/english/anderson and click on Chapter 6.

Planning Guide for Research			
Project	Improved formula for antibacterial soap		
Readers	Vice Presidents for New Product Development and Marketing		
Readers' Questions	Possible Sources	Assessment of Each Source	When to Consult
Are our competitors developing this same technology?	Trade journals	Probably reliable	Immediately
	Competitor reports to stockholders	Biased	Next week
When will our design be ready for production?	Kami Mason, Project Director	Objective, informed	Immediately
What will the manufacturing cost be?	Cost Engineering Department	Objective, but still working with estimates	Immediately; confirm close to completion of report

GUIDELINE 3 CHECK EACH SOURCE FOR LEADS TO OTHER SOURCES

Conducting research is often like solving a crime. You don't know exactly what the outcome will be—or where to find the clues. Consequently, it makes sense to check each source for leads to other sources. Scrutinize the footnotes and bibliographies of every book, article, and report you consult. When you locate a book in the library stacks, browse through books nearby. When you interview people, ask them to suggest additional places to look and persons to contact. Be sure to schedule time to follow up on promising leads.

GUIDELINE 4 CAREFULLY EVALUATE WHAT YOU FIND

You have no use for information that your readers won't find useful or persuasive or that you yourself don't believe to be credible. Consequently, you should evaluate continuously the facts and ideas you discover. If you discover that your readers will perceive a particular person to be biased, move on to someone with more credibility. If you find that a book or web page about your topic treats it at the wrong level or with the wrong focus, close it and move on to something else.