

MMW4T, Fall 2007

Suggestions for Conducting Research

Below are some suggestions for carrying on a quarter-long research project. You will find it helpful to read through them before working on the next writing assignment.

Don't worry if your topic changes several times. The best research always seems to be “accidental”—you're in the library or online looking for something else and you just happen to find a book or an article on a topic that fascinates you. Getting to the library early and reading widely will help you to find a topic that really engages you.

Don't worry if you can't come up with a thesis right away—or if your thesis seems to keep mutating. At this point in your research project, you should be asking a lot of questions and doing a lot of reading. It's much too early for you to know exactly what you'll be writing about; your thesis will depend in part on what you find in the library. The best papers come out of extensive research and careful reasoning, all of which takes time.

Start with a narrow question. Ten to twelve pages, although it might seem endless to you, is really not very much space in which to make an intelligent argument. You need to narrow the scope of your paper in order to ensure that you can adequately explain yourself. For example:

Much too broad: How did Rome maintain influence over its empire?

Still too broad: How did Rome maintain influence over Egypt?

Still too broad: How did Rome maintain influence over Egypt in the first century B.C.E.?

Better: How did Caesar and Antony affect Cleopatra's rule?

Even better: How did Caesar (or, how did Antony) affect Cleopatra's rule?

Why a narrow question? Because you need to make an argument in this paper. Arguments are built on claims. Each claim that you make must be supported with evidence and explanation. That takes time—and space. If, for example, you wanted to follow up on the question of Antony's effect on Cleopatra's rule, you would need to consider:

The nature of Egyptian government in Cleopatra's time and the history of the rulers who immediately preceded her

The nature of the state that Cleopatra governed

What Cleopatra was doing as a ruler when Antony arrived. (You might include a brief consideration of Caesar's influence on her career up to that time.)

The historical events of Cleopatra's and Antony's history together

How Antony's involvement might have changed the course of Cleopatra's reign

So focus on a narrow question—but do a wide search. If you wanted to follow up on the Cleopatra topic, you would need to read about all of the following:

Background information:

Egyptian history and politics in the 50 to 75 years prior to Cleopatra's birth

The history of prior intervention in Egypt (this might include the history of Ptolomeic

Egypt, which was established by Alexander the Great, and should certainly include Julius Caesar's interactions with Cleopatra and any other Roman intervention in Egypt)

The nature of monarchy in Cleopatra's time (e.g., was Egypt still ruled by pharaohs? Was Cleopatra considered to be a pharaoh? If so, what would have been her expected mode of rule? If not, what was she considered to be? Did she rule alone, or did she have advisors? And so forth)

Details about the phenomenon you're researching:

The life and death of Cleopatra (including what Cleopatra was doing as a ruler when Antony arrived)

The life and death of Antony

The historical events of Cleopatra's and Antony's time together

Scholarly speculation regarding the possible effects of Antony's involvement with Cleopatra

For the next few weeks, expect to do a lot of photocopying (buy a copy card and put \$20.00 on it), to take a lot of notes, and to write a large number of exploratory paragraphs that might or might not make it into your final draft. It is only *after* you have accumulated a great deal of information that you can start to organize your work into a coherent paper: to decide what your thesis is and how much more research you need to do.

Note: every time you photocopy a text or take notes on your reading, make sure that you write down all of the citation information for that source. There is nothing more frustrating than wanting to use a quotation in your paper and realizing that you don't remember where you got it. Note also that inventing a source for an unidentifiable quotation constitutes serious academic misconduct—so of course you don't want to do *that*.

For now, make sure that you are working on a sufficiently narrow and arguable level-3 question. And remember: just because a particular source provides an answer to your question doesn't mean that the question isn't arguable. "Arguable" means that several plausible interpretations exist; your task is to decide which interpretation you support.