

THE **REVISED**
PROCRASTINATOR'S
HANDBOOK OF Library
Research

New edition.
Same excuses.



UWINNIPEG
LIBRARY Q

INTRODUCTION: MATT DAMON, MARS, AND A LITTLE TOUGH LOVE

Near the end of the 2015 film *The Martian*, Matt Damon addresses a group of astronaut trainees, discussing how he escaped from Mars. *“You just begin,”* he says. *“You do the math. You solve one problem, and then you solve the next one...and if you solve enough problems, you get to come home.”*

So. You’ve left your research paper to the last minute. You’re Matt Damon, stranded on a desolate planet of your own making. Luckily, you have a direct line to us, the UW Librarians. We’re mission control, ready to talk you home. Writing a paper is a lot like escaping from Mars; you solve one problem, and then you solve the next. Eventually, if you put all the pieces together, you’ll have a completed essay.

This guide is designed to walk you through the process by 1) quickly helping you generate ideas from academic sources, and 2) turning those ideas into a paper.

First, a few ground rules:

- 1) *Don't panic.* Matt Damon didn't.
- 2) *Recognize that "writing" is not simply putting words on paper.* Your time will be better spent gathering sources, reading, and outlining. If you spend the next day only putting words on paper, you'll be disappointed.
- 3) *Don't fixate on word and/or page counts.* We've designed this guide so that if you follow it, the words will come naturally.
- 4) *Don't try to "solve" anything in your paper.* An undergraduate research paper is a chance to demonstrate interest and learning, not fix a cri-

sis (at this point, the crisis is your paper).

- 5) *Stick to the time limits.* Throughout this guide you'll find recommended time limits for some of the tasks. While some may take more or less time depending on your strengths, skills, and topic, try your best to stick to the timeline. It will help bring focus and order to the process.

Most importantly, remember that *your paper will not be as good as it could have been had you started sooner.*

While there are a lot of different ways to approach library research, this guide treats it as discrete, step-by-step process. In order to maximize your results, you would ideally “rinse and repeat” many of these steps while carefully weighing ideas over a period of weeks or months. You don't have that kind of time, however. So grab a coffee, adjust your space helmet, and listen up.

PART I: REMEMBER WHEN WE SAID, “DON’T PANIC”

We mean it. Taking the time to organize your thoughts is an important step in getting your paper completed. Do not skip this part, no matter how unimportant it may seem to you at first.

Three simple steps:

1. *Get Organized (5 minutes)*: There are great tools to help you stay organized (Refworks, EndNote, etc.) but you don't have time to learn a new tool now. Instead, create a folder on your desktop named something like “[Course number] Research Paper”. Create another document and save it as “Notes”.
- 2) *Understand Your Assignment (15 minutes)*: Read through your assignment and write out any require-

ments or suggestions. Organize them into a table similar to this:

Grading Criteria	<i>Correct integration of research; academic rigour; consideration of opposing views; well-formulated thesis</i>
Topic	<i>A key topic on social media</i>
Style	<i>4-5 pages, MLA format</i>
Sources	<i>Five sources, three from an academic journal</i>

It's likely your paper will be graded using a rubric like this, so you will use this to make sure you're completing your assignment. This is your checklist, so return to it regularly. When it's complete, you're done.

- 3) *Select a Topic (30 minutes):* There are two scenarios you might face.
- *Scenario 1:* If your professor gave you a list of potential topics, highlight one or two that seem interesting. Don't reconsider your choices.
 - *Scenario 2:* If you have an open choice of topic, look at your course syllabus and/or your textbook and choose one or two chapters or sections that were interesting.

PART II: LOVE YOUR DOG, NOT YOUR ESSAY TOPIC

Writing a last-minute paper is not the time to explore your passion for an obscure area of study, no matter how interesting. You need a topic with a depth of coverage that can easily be explored. Go to the library web-

site (library.uwinnipeg.ca) and try out three searches for each potential topic in the following areas:

1. *Encyclopedias*: Find a subject encyclopedia for the course subject. For example, search *encyclopedias AND sociology*. Limit to ebooks if you're unable to visit the library. Now look within the encyclopedia for a background article about your topic(s). Scan the articles to see if the topic has a lot of different dimensions. You want a "meaty" topic. Keep this page open, or save the link, and write the name of the encyclopedia and article title in your notes document.
2. *Literature Reviews*: There may be existing reviews of the literature around your topic. Try searching for "literature review" AND [your topic]. If this type of article exists, download the full-text to your folder and use the "Cite" option to create a reference in

the appropriate style (MLA in this case) and paste it into your notes document.

3. *General Keyword Search*: Try searching keywords for your potential topics and subtopics. Be specific. If you see any really relevant articles, download the full-text and use the cite option to generate references and paste them into your notes doc.

If you are considering more than one possible topic, *pick one now* based on what you found. Don't reconsider your choice. Go through your folder and notes and delete anything related to the other topics you were considering, leaving only things relevant to your topic of focus. Congratulations! You've selected a topic. Don't worry that you haven't written a single word yet. You're in alright shape. Take a short break.

PART III: WE IMPRESS YOU WITH SOME LIBRARY SCIENCE

Once you have selected a decent topic, it is time to narrow your searching. Searching too broadly can be frustrating. Looking back at the encyclopedia article and the literature review you did in the previous section, try to pull out a few subtopics and other keywords.

1. *Create an Outline (10 minutes)*: It should look something like this:

Topic	<i>Social Networking and “Fake News”</i>
Subtopic	<i>Fact-checking behaviour; sharing without reading; narcissism; confirmation bias</i>

Then generate a list of related terms for each subtopic and format them like this:

("social networking" OR "social media" OR facebook OR twitter)
("fake news" OR misinformation OR hoax)
("fact checking" OR verification)
("reading habits" OR sharing OR dissemination)
(narcissism OR ego OR self-esteem)
("confirmation bias" OR "belief-bias effect" OR "reasoning bias")

2. *Gather Sources (30 minutes):* Search for your main topic alongside the subtopics, one at a time. Using the example above, our first search might look like this:

("social networking" OR "social media" OR facebook OR twitter) AND ("confirmation bias" OR "belief-bias effect" OR "reasoning bias")

If the search results don't seem relevant, adjust your search terms to refocus. This might take a few tries. You may also want to use the limiters in the

left-hand column to focus on different formats, years, etc. If you're really unable to find anything good, move on. You can reconsider this subtopic later if needed.

Download the full-texts of relevant articles as you go, and organize these in the folder you created earlier. Remember to create references for each item in your notes document, so you don't have to do it later. When you're done, compare your sources to the assignment criteria you created at the beginning. Make sure you are using enough sources, and the right kind.

You're doing great. Get a bite to eat.

PART IV: THE PART WHERE THINGS GET INTERESTING

This should be the bulk of where you spend your time. The more time you spend on understanding a source, the less energy you'll need to actually write your paper.

1. *Read and Summarize Sources (30 minutes - 5 hours):* . Try to identify the sections of the articles that are most useful or relevant. Write your notes for each source right under the reference in your notes document. Note any interesting or relevant ideas and the page where you found it. When you're done, take a minute to summarize the whole source in your own words. Each entry should look a little bit like the following:

Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211-236.

- popular online reports suggest that many people get news through social media, fake news stories may have a broader reach than mainstream news, many people who are exposed to false stories will believe them, and in 2016, fake news stories tended to favour Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. (212)

- 14% of American adults identify social media as their “most important” source of news. (212)

- “questions about who becomes the arbiter of truth.” (233)

2. *Review Your Outline (15 minutes):* Based on what you've read and the notes you've taken, rework your outline so you feel confident that all the topics will be adequately addressed. Any subtopics that were difficult can either be combined with others,

set aside for future research, or simply dropped.

Try to imagine what questions will be addressed in each section of your paper and how each section will flow into the next. Here's an example:

Topic: Social Networking and "Fake News"

- *Introduction and Thesis Statement*

- *Prevalence of Misinformation*

How bad is this problem/effects?

- *Echo Chambers/Filter Bubbles*

Do users see contrasting views?

- *Confirmation Bias (subtopic 3)*

Do users consider new information?

- *Conclusion*

3. *Draw connections between ideas (30-60 minutes):*

First, cluster your sources into your new outline.

Each source that touches on a certain subtopic should be mentioned in that part of your paper.

Remember, one source can appear in multiple sections of your paper, that's perfectly okay. Now ask yourself:

- 1) What does each source say about the subtopic?
- 2) Do sources align with your expectations? Disagreement?
- 3) Do sources agree with one another? Controversy?
- 4) What questions remain unanswered?

Prevalence of Misinformation on Social Media

How bad is this problem? What effects has it had?

Source A identifies four main ways that misinformation gets disseminated on social media, arguing that this phenomenon is widespread.

Source B agrees that the problem exists, but based on their research, the stories that spread through social media would not have altered the outcome in the particular case under study: the 2016 US Presidential election.

With this exercise, you can begin to see your paper taking shape. Do this for each major section in your outline and reassess whether this collection of sources is adequate to address the subtopics. If not, return to Part 4 and reformulate your searches to uncover additional sources and fill in the gaps.

PART V: WRITING IS EASY WHEN YOU KNOW WHAT TO SAY

It's time to write. In general, you'll begin by piecing together the notes from the previous section to develop your paper. Make sure you include in-text citations to indicate the source of each idea. Create transitions from one paragraph to the next so the text flows nicely. Add your own thoughts and commentary on the ideas you found in the sources and you'll have a first draft in no time.

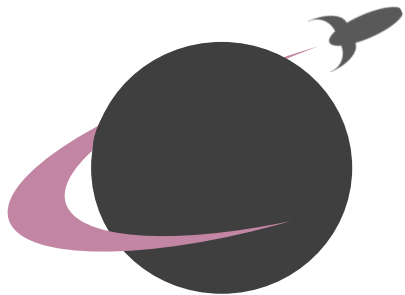
**Please note that while librarians are excellent at gathering information, we are not the main writing experts on campus. We recommend meeting with a Writing Tutor in the future when you have time if you'd like to improve your writing.*

Read over your draft many times, making necessary adjustments so the text is clear and correct. For each in-text citation that you created, copy and paste the full reference from your notes document into the Bibliography (or Works Cited, or References) at the end of your paper. The Online Writing Lab offers comprehensive summaries of the major citation styles, so use it to verify that your citations and references are done properly.

CONCLUSION: ESCAPE VELOCITY

If you've followed the steps outlined here, you should be on your way to submitting a decent paper. More importantly, we hope you've learned a thing or two about how to effectively research a topic. While this guide was designed to help students find their way out of a tricky, last-minute situation, you can see how effective a systematic approach can be when you build in the proper amount of time. With a little bit more room to think, you can take it from decent to excellent.

As always, we're here to help. Feel free to ask us anything. We provide in-person and virtual assistance/training for library services. Our Reference Desk is a place where you can get research questions answered, so please feel free to stop by. We're located on the 4th floor of Centennial Hall or library.uwinnipeg.ca.



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