Appendix A

How to Research a Term Paper in Gerontology

Research and writing can be intimidating to many students, especially in a field such as gerontology, which is a new subject to most. But research and writing needn’t be frightening. Skillful research is the key to good writing, and careful thinking is the foundation for both.

Doing the background research for a term paper in gerontology is more than half the task of actually writing the paper itself. If you are successful in the research, you end up having other people do your work for you! Of course, that does not mean plagiarism or simply copying what other people have written without giving proper credit. But the trick in writing is to save yourself the trouble of reinventing the wheel. You want to avoid floundering around trying to rediscover a fact or idea that someone else has already worked out before you. Wasting time that way is not necessary at all. In fact, it detracts from the real job of research and writing, namely, thinking about what others have written and deciding what to take and put into your own work.

The key is not to work harder, but to work smarter. By building on other people’s work and giving credit to them where credit is due, you save yourself time and devote your best efforts to expressing what you really have to say. The process is the same as the one that takes place in science. All science and all scholarship stand on the work of others. This point holds true for the beginning student no less than for great thinkers. Indeed, the great physicist Isaac Newton himself once said, “If I have seen further than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.”

How does this approach apply to your writing a term paper? Conducting library research for a term paper is a bit like looking for buried treasure. If you don’t know exactly where the treasure is buried, you end up spending a lot of time digging in places where you imagine the treasure might be. You rely on guesswork instead of careful thought. Once you have a hunch about where the treasure lies, then the actual digging takes practically no time at all. It is just the same with library research. Once you have developed your search strategy—your map for where treasure might be found—then the information sources at your fingertips will guide you quickly to where the treasure lies.
The rest of the work—including writing up your findings—will actually take very little time, because you can build on the work of others.

DEFINING YOUR TOPIC

At every stage in the research process, you need to ask yourself: What is the question I am asking? (What information am I trying to find?) You don’t ask this question only once. For example, suppose you are trying to find out what percentage of people are retired at ages 60 and 70. At first, the question may seem simple. But as you dig deeper, you find that there may be uncertainty about how to count people as retired instead of unemployed or disabled. As you look into the statistics, you discover that behind the solid numbers, differing assumptions are involved. In effect, you ask your basic question over and over again as you look through bibliographic sources.

When you are planning your topic, you might find it helpful first to free-associate, or let your mind wander. You need to think about points related to your topic but also about other subject terms and ideas related to your topic. This process of cross-referencing is at the heart of research and creative thinking. For example, suppose you’re interested in writing a paper on retirement. Retirement is a big subject, maybe too big for one paper. Social scientists have written whole books on the subject; some have devoted their entire careers to it. But stay with the big subject for a while. Then, think about all the other subjects—the key words—that are related to retirement: work, pensions, Social Security, and so on. Each of these could also be a term paper or indeed a whole book.

As you look over all your key words, look for connections that interest you; for instance, maybe you see a connection between pensions and retirement. You might begin to put together a hypothesis or a theme—for example, What is the relationship between pensions and retirement behavior?

When you ask yourself research questions, it is helpful if you write down some tentative answers. That’s the first step toward making an outline, or a plan, for your work. Carrying out research is a bit like building a house. In constructing the house, it pays to put time into planning and thinking. You don’t wait to draw up blueprints until you are halfway finished constructing the house. To write a term paper, you also need a plan. Write down your ideas first without worrying too much about whether your plan is adequate or complete; you’re likely to change it later anyway. Then, start consulting other sources.

STARTING YOUR SEARCH

In constructing a fruitful search strategy, you face a catch-22. You can’t really narrow your research question until you know the subject matter better. But you can’t define the subject matter without carving it down to size with the right research question. Imagine how discouraging your task would be if you didn’t realize that pension levels and retirement behavior might be related. In gerontology, as in all fields, the amount of knowledge is simply too vast for you to master all of it. To make matters worse, gerontology is a multidisciplinary field, involving specialized subjects such as economics, biology, and psychology. Without a clear plan for research, you can simply get lost.
The secret of research is to keep widening your search process while also narrowing it at the same time. For example, the topic you've picked has two key ideas: "pensions" and "retirement." Some of the references you find may lead you in directions that don't interest you—for instance, "pension fund investments" or "mandatory retirement." But other references will be right on target and will lead you to refine your topic even further. There lies the real process of thinking: testing your ideas against a "map" of knowledge that sums up facts about the world. The mistake that people often make is to construct, at the beginning, a search that is either too narrow or too broad.

So, what to do? By all means, carve your topic down to size. But then, as you're searching for information on your refined topic, also be willing to follow the concept to related topics. In looking at "pension income," you might find references to Social Security, IRAs, and so on. Perhaps you'll come upon a term that isn't very familiar, like Keogh plan.

As you review what you find, you'll begin to see connections among concepts. But the connected concepts may or may not be exactly the ones listed in computer printouts or abstract summaries. You have to develop a "sixth sense," constantly looking for clues. The result of this process is a more complete cross-referencing of your subject matter; in effect, you're creating a dense network of concepts that fully captures your topic and prepares you to write your paper.

A number of resources are available to help you build your network of concepts. One is the library's own classification system; another is the librarians themselves. The Library of Congress subject headings present a uniform method of classifying documents, and that can be a useful place to begin. But the real clues will come as you examine the books and journals themselves. Don't simply go to the library card catalog or start browsing through the latest issue of a periodical related to your subject. Doing that will just waste your time, unless you have done some preliminary planning. By all means, enlist librarians to help you, but don't rely exclusively on librarians. They can't be specialists in all subject matters, and they can help you the most if you've already done some thinking about the question you want to pursue. If you've thought about your question, then a librarian can help guide you to the information sources you need.

Another kind of resource that might be helpful is the computerized online database. But because searching and researching are not mechanical processes, a computer search won't solve all your problems, and it may even give the illusion of completeness. Computer searches also present the student with certain dangers. There are two general kinds of dangers in online searching. The first is summarized in a slogan familiar to computer specialists: Garbage in, garbage out. That is, you can only get an answer to the question you ask; if your question or hypothesis is badly framed—for example, if it's too vague—then you won't get useful information. The second danger is that you may get too much information, including lots of references that are irrelevant or useless. For both dangers, the cure is the same: good strategies for searching and for eliminating what is extraneous to your search. The main message here is that you can't do bibliographic research just by looking for simple terminology, by looking up words in an index, card catalog, or database. One reason is that there are so many related but distinct terms in gerontology: aged, older persons, elderly, senior citizens, and so on. But if you can formulate a research question and remain alert to the meanings of the terms you encounter, you can find the sources that will help you answer your question. Once you find the spot you've been looking for, the buried treasure will be lying at your feet.
EIGHT STEPS FOR CARRYING OUT LIBRARY RESEARCH

Step 1. Consult *The Encyclopedia of Aging* (see “Resources” section, below) for the lead article on your subject. Be sure to make note of the relevant bibliography citations.

Step 2. Consult one of the handbooks on aging (from biology, the social sciences, the humanities, etc.) or a current textbook to see if there is a chapter or a section of a chapter devoted to your subject. The handbook’s index can be useful here. (Be sure also to check the more detailed resource list provided at the end of Appendix A.)

Step 3. Review the bibliography references you have found and organize them by date, starting with the most recent. Look for titles that focus directly on your topic but approach the subject in a broad way. A literature review article is often an excellent way to get started. Many published articles begin with a literature review or “state-of-the-art” summary of what is known about a topic.

Step 4. Consult the AgeLine Database on the AARP Web site with keywords related to your topic. Read the abstracts for publications to find the most up-to-date literature on your subject. Looking at abstracts is a quick and handy way to see a summary of what’s in a possible reference without wasting time reading the entire article. You get more than just a title, and you can find out quickly if the publication could have value for you.

Step 5 (optional). To be truly comprehensive and up-to-date, ask a friendly librarian to conduct a computerized search on your subject through AgeLine or a similar online database. From your previous bibliographic work, you should have a good collection of key words or authors to help the librarian focus on your topic as precisely as possible.

Step 6. By now, you are ready to go to your college library to find the most up-to-date, relevant books and articles on your tentative topic. But note: Do not judge a book by its cover or a reference by its title. Remember to browse through any book you find, looking at the table of contents, the index, the introduction, a summary chapter, and so on, maybe even sampling a few chapters in between. Don’t make the mistake of reading straight through the entire text of what looks like the “perfect” book or article on your subject. Instead, zero in on the essential information and let the rest go. You can always come back later if you need to. It’s good to get other points of view on your topic.

Step 7. When you are browsing through books or articles, be sure to check their bibliographies or reference lists for interesting titles. Using ideas from these books or articles, you will then be able to fine-tune your topic while taking notes and picking up additional ideas that you can incorporate into your paper.

Step 8. In most cases, you will find the references you need in your local college library. But if you cannot find them, don’t hesitate to request books or articles on interlibrary loan, for example, from a wider university system or from other libraries. But don’t fall into the trap of the perpetual scholar, who keeps searching forever and never quite finds the “perfect” reference source. In most cases, you will find what you need close to home. When writing a term paper, you have a deadline to meet.
At some point in this process, you are likely to find yourself coming up again and again with the same books, articles, and author names as you look through new information sources. Don’t be discouraged by this. It isn’t a sign of failure or that you are “going around in circles.” On the contrary, it may be a sign of success. If you have gone far enough in your search, it may mean that you’ve struck pay dirt. When you have gone really deeply into any subject area, you are bound to start seeing the same authors’ names coming up again and again.

At that point, it is time to look through the references on hand and decide which ones are high quality and which ones are relevant for your now refined topic area. Decide which ones are really the most useful to you and gather the key ideas, always giving credit but putting the ideas into your own words. When you have found the treasure you are looking for, go home and start writing.

**RESOURCES FOR PAPERS IN GERONTOLOGY**

**Encyclopedias and Handbooks**

The best one-volume reference source for gerontology is *The Encyclopedia of Aging*, edited by George L. Maddox (New York: Springer, 2001). It contains more than 500 entries written by leading authorities in each field. This volume is accessible to students as well as more advanced scholars, and its vast list of references makes it extremely useful. Also worthwhile is the *Dictionary of Gerontology*, by Diana K. Harris (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988), a short volume that even beginning students will find easily understandable.

Among the most useful single-volume reference works are the many handbooks that focus on aging and the biological sciences, social sciences, psychology, and human services. These include the following:


**Abstracts and Databases**

Each issue of *Abstracts in Social Gerontology: Current Literature on Aging* contains 250 abstracts, or short summaries, of the most important recent literature, cross-indexed and organized by topics, along with 250 other (nonannotated) bibliographic citations. *Abstracts in Social Gerontology* is issued four times each year by Sage Publications in cooperation with the National Council on Aging. Another important resource is *Gerontological Abstracts*, which covers chiefly biology and health sciences.

AgeLine is a computerized online database, accessible by telephone line and modem anywhere in the world. References in AgeLine cover all aspects of the social sciences, health care, and human services. The database includes books, articles, government documents, and dissertations as well as reports on government-sponsored research in gerontology.

For references to biomedical subjects and other health-related topics, another good source is MedLine, produced by the National Library of Medicine. A college library or other research-oriented library will be able to provide computer search services. A librarian can access both AgeLine and MedLine through DIALOG, an online information company that provides many different databases. A librarian or Internet search engine can help provide access to other bibliographical databases.


**Statistics**

The conventional sources for U.S. statistics are the publications of the U.S. Census Bureau, for example, *Current Population Reports*, which updates information from the 2000 census. Census documents are available in most college libraries. The *Health Care Financing Administration* and the special committees of the U.S. Senate and House Committees on Aging also publish periodic reports, which can often be obtained by writing to these agencies or by visiting a large library. Documents from specialized sources may be difficult to obtain in local libraries, and they are not always easy to understand.

For the student, the best quick sources for statistics are probably the comprehensive data published by the U.S. Administration on Aging, *A Profile of Older Americans: 2001,*
Appendix A

Guides to Research and Information


Among older works are John B. Balkema (ed.), Aging: A Guide to Resources (Syracuse, NY: Gaylord, 1983); and Linna Funk Place, Linda Parker, and Forrest Berghorn, Aging and the Aged: An Annotated Bibliography and Library Research Guide (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980), the latter written as a research and study tool for undergraduates. Both volumes are out-of-date, but they are still valuable for learning about the field of aging to approach term paper topics.

Other Valuable Reference Works


Ronald Manheimer (ed.), Aging Almanac, Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1993. An up-to-date overview of different special subject areas in the field of aging. Written for a popular audience but based on solid academic sources.


The 1968 volume by Matilda White Riley and Anne Foner, Aging and Society: An Inventory of Research Findings (New York: Basic Books), gives a comprehensive summary of knowledge through the late 1960s—out-of-date now, but an important accomplishment nonetheless. See also Matilda White Riley, Beth B. Hess, and K. Bond (eds.), Aging in Society: Selected Review of Recent Research (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1983) and Sarah Beguns et al., An Annotated Bibliography of Recent Research on the Elderly (Monticello, IL: Vance Bibliographies, 1982).
See also Diana K. Harris, *The Sociology of Aging: An Annotated Bibliography and Sourcebook* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990). This volume covers culture and society, social inequality, social institutions, and environment and aging. Special chapters cover demography, death and dying, crime and deviance, racial and ethnic groups, and many other topics. The book also covers periodicals and source materials on aging.

Finally, the federal government is an important source of information. See, for example, the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, *Publications List* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office).

**Textbooks**

Current textbooks on aging and gerontology are valuable sources of information and further reference for students. The following is a partial list of textbooks that may prove useful:


**Important Journals and Other Periodicals**

For an overview of important periodicals in the field of gerontology, see Shirley B. Hesslein, *Serials on Aging: An Analytical Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986). This book covers general periodicals as well as periodicals specializing in social gerontology, health and biomedicine, retirement and pensions, and statistics and reference tools. It includes a geographic index and a list of publishers.
Among the many notable periodicals available, the following can be recommended:

*Ageing and Society.* New York: Cambridge University Press, quarterly. Edited in Great Britain with an international and interdisciplinary perspective; strong on humanities and social science.

*Contemporary Long-Term Care.* Nashville, TN: Advantage, monthly. Covers all aspects of long-term care, with an emphasis on applied and practical problems.


*Gerontology and Geriatrics Education.* Useful for educational issues, including training for the different professional fields involved in aging.

*International Journal of Aging and Human Development.* Farmingdale, NY: Baywood, eight times annually. Interdisciplinary in the social sciences, but articles with clinical and practical application as well.

*Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.* A technical medical journal for geriatricians. Many articles are above the level of the beginning student, but some are accessible.

*Journal of Gerontological Nursing.* Leading periodical that covers clinical health care issues of interest to many health care providers.


*Journals of Gerontology.* Gerontological Society of America, bimonthly. Actually four separate journals that cover the biological sciences, medical sciences, psychological sciences, and social sciences. Very technical and specialized; only for very advanced inquiry.
