

Starting Your Research

This guide outlines a practical approach to beginning the research process for an essay. The aim is not to read everything available on a topic, but to develop a clear direction and begin gathering useful evidence.



Essay Writing Is a Process

Essay writing involves several interconnected stages:

- Planning
- Thinking
- Researching
- Writing
- Editing

These stages do not always happen in a fixed order. Research may lead to new ideas, and writing may highlight areas where further research is needed. Planning, thinking, and researching often develop together.

Step 1: Brainstorm what you already know

Before opening books, articles, or databases, spend a few minutes thinking about the topic.

Consider the following questions:

- What do I already know about this topic?
- What seems most important?
- What do I find confusing?
- Which ideas are relevant to the question?

Record your thoughts in any format that works for you, such as a list, mind map, rough notes, or a simple outline. The purpose is to generate ideas and identify areas that need further investigation.

Step 2: Create a rough research outline

Once you have generated some initial ideas, organise them into a simple outline to identify:

- What information you already have
- What information you still need
- Possible themes or headings
- Where you might find useful sources

A research outline gives your reading a purpose and helps you focus on finding information that is relevant to the assignment.

Step 3: Begin researching

Start with some preliminary reading and focus on gathering evidence that will help you answer the question.

Useful types of evidence may include:

- Key theories
- Important definitions
- Statistics
- Quotations
- Scholarly viewpoints and debates

The goal at this stage is not to collect as many sources as possible. Focus on finding material that improves your understanding of the topic and helps you develop your ideas.

Step 4: Be selective

As you read, ask yourself:

- Does this source help me understand the topic?
- Does it support, challenge, or complicate my argument?
- Is it relevant to the assignment question?

Remember that not every source you find will be useful.

Step 5: Organise your notes

Keep track of sources from the beginning.

As you read:

- Take concise notes
- Record full reference details
- Organise material under the headings in your research outline
- Group evidence by theme or topic

A well-organised set of notes will make the writing stage more efficient and reduce the likelihood of losing important information.

Find out more tips and resources at tcd.ie/sld