

GGY 435 – ENVIRONMENTAL GEOGRAPHY

Paper Guidelines – Assembling Sources, Conducting a Literature Review

The single most important step in writing a top-notch research paper is to be well informed about the topic. The process of researching a topic is time-consuming and requires an expertise that can only be developed through much trial and error. While there are many tools available to help you research your topic, ultimately the quality of your research depends on the amount of time you spend searching for information.

Your assignment for the rest of September is to assemble as large a list of sources as possible, and to begin sifting through them for information that will help you write your research paper. On Wed., Oct. 8 you will hand in an annotated bibliography with full citations for at least 6 sources that you will use in writing your paper. Each citation will be followed by a brief *annotation*: a few sentences describing what information the source contains, why it is important for your topic, and how you plan to incorporate it into your paper. Most of the sources should be peer-reviewed journal articles, books, or government reports. Web sites may be helpful for getting oriented, but they are usually not good sources of primary information. (Some web sites, for instance those containing government reports or online journal articles may be OK. We will discuss this.)

This handout summarizes four steps you can follow to research your topic in depth and begin assembling a literature review.

1. Search for all possible published sources. Virtually anything that has been written about your subject is catalogued somewhere in a bibliography, index, or database. Searching through these reference sources takes time, so start early and don't get discouraged by setbacks.

- Types of source material: journal articles, books, government publications, technical reports, monographs, thesis papers and dissertations, newspapers and magazines, maps and atlases, web documents with *primary* information, databases, personal contacts with individuals or agencies.
- Online databases: GeoRef, GeoBase, EbscoHost, government indexes, etc.
- Most important source: sources cited in other articles/books. Find the authors that are frequently cited by others and go straight to them - these are the recognized experts in the field. In other words, every item you find should be a source of additional items. This may be the single most effective way to conduct a literature review.
- Keep a list for bibliographic purposes: printouts, photocopies, index cards, notes.
- Don't hesitate to ask a reference librarian for help using the search tools or finding materials in the library collection. They will be most helpful if you go to them with specific questions about particular titles, databases, document types, etc.

2. Determine the value of the sources you have located. Not everything you find will be useful or relevant to your topic. Knowing what is or isn't valuable requires that you have a good idea of what your paper will and will not cover, and what type of information you are looking for. Your focus may change slightly as you discover what topics have been addressed by previous research.

- Most valuable: review articles, books, bibliographies that summarize previous work on a topic.
- Very valuable: journal articles, book chapters, reports of research results relevant to your topic.
- Sometimes valuable: technical reports, data archives, newspaper/magazine articles, web sites.
- Not very valuable: conference proceedings that list titles or abstracts of presentations, educational publications and web sites geared towards the general public, research proposals or project plans.

3. Obtain the relevant sources. Virtually any published work can be obtained through Randall Library. It is up to you to identify the source; it is the librarian's role to help you locate and obtain it. Don't hesitate to ask for help from the reference librarians. They have a better understanding of the library's collection and online services than anyone else. Once you have a title and bibliographic information for a source, follow these steps to locate it:

- Search the holdings in Randall Library's online catalogue. This will tell you if the library has the source and how to access it. There are several possible outcomes...
- The source may be available in the library print collection. It may be in the stacks (mainly books and archived journals), or it may be in the separate sections for periodicals, thesis papers, government documents, microfilms, reference materials, or special collections.
- The source may be available online as a "full-text" document in the library electronic holdings. This will usually be in the form of a .pdf file that you can download and print, or save to disk. Full-text is increasingly common for scholarly journal articles from large publishers. In most cases, these online sources should be cited as print sources – what you are accessing is NOT a web site, rather it is a digital copy of a printed source.
- The source may not be available through Randall Library holdings. If so, you should use the interlibrary loan service available to all UNCW students and faculty. This may take a week or two, so start early and don't give up! "The library didn't have it" is not an acceptable excuse, especially for critical sources that could be the difference between a good paper and a great one.
- Keep a list with full bibliographic citations for each source as you find them. This will save you a lot of time later when you are assembling a bibliography.

4. Read and synthesize the information in your sources. A good literature review describes the overall state of knowledge about your topic. It combines information from various sources in a novel way, applying some sort of logic or structure to the source material. (One reason to start searching early is to give yourself time to read and absorb your source material, and to begin organizing it.) A good literature review does not simply list the names of authors who have studied the topic, or simply recite the information contained in your sources. It should provide the context for your topic in a way that sets the stage for your specific case study or thesis argument to follow. Consider the following questions as you begin to assimilate information from your sources:

- What societal needs are driving the research into this subject? Who is researching the topic, and why? What methods or technologies have been developed in order to address this subject?
- How advanced is our knowledge of the subject? How recent is the body of knowledge about this subject, and what aspects of the topic have been addressed by researchers in the past?
- How conclusive is the research into this subject? Is there general agreement about the main issues, or are there unresolved debates? Are there any major gaps in our understanding of the topic, or parts of it that are firmly established?
- To what extent have the results of research been translated into public policy? Are there government agencies or non-government organizations dedicated to studying this topic? What regulations or guidelines exist as a result of past research?
- To what extent has this topic been studied in or applied to specific places? Could your paper benefit from listing, comparing, or contrasting examples of the problem you are researching?
- Given the sources that are available, how do you plan to approach this topic? Are you in general agreement with the experts, or are you pointing out an exception to the rule? Does the existing literature suggest a good way to organize your ideas – maybe geographically, or chronologically?