

1. If you've explored the farthest reaches of the Net, starting with a library may seem old-fashioned, but today's libraries connect you to the best online resources. So when we caution you not to rely on the Internet for your research, we don't mean that you ought not go online. The three of us work online whenever we can. But you must distinguish online resources that are extensions of libraries (and are as reliable) from random Internet sources whose reliability is always in doubt.
2. At the other extreme are those who disappear into the bowels of the library and don't emerge until they've completed their project, sometimes years later. (We don't actually know anyone who has done that, but we know some who have come close.) Most researchers take the middle way, relying on regular conversations to guide their reading, which stimulate more questions and hunches to try out on others
3. Start a keyword search with the specific terms that you used to narrow your topic—for example, Alamo, legend, Texas independence, and so on. Once you find books under those terms, look at the Library of Congress subject headings, either on the back of their title page or on their "details" page in the online catalog. On the back of this book's title page are the terms
4. On the other hand, if you find nothing, your topic may be too narrow or too far off the beaten track to yield quick results. But you could also be on to an important question that nobody has thought about, at least not for a while. For example, "friendship" was once an important topic for philosophers, but it was then ignored by major encyclopedias for centuries. Recently, though, it has been revived as a topic of serious research.
5. More important, you'll miss the benefits of serendipity—a chance encounter with a valuable source that occurs only when a title happens to catch your eye.
6. Most established scholars are reliable, but be cautious if the topic is a contested social issue such as gun control or abortion. Even reputable scholars can have axes to grind, especially if their research is financially supported by a special interest group.
7. You must use up-to-date sources, but what counts as current depends on the field. In computer science, a journal article can be out-of-date in months; in the social sciences, ten years pushes the limit.
8. Most reputable presses and journals ask experts to review a book or article before it is published; it is called "peer review." Many essay collections, however, are reviewed only by the named editor(s). Few commercial magazines use peer review. If a publication hasn't been peer-reviewed, be suspicious.
9. But if you are doing an advanced project, an MA thesis, or a PhD dissertation, search beyond them. If, for example, your project were on the economic effects of agricultural changes in late sixteenth-century England, you might

read Elizabethan plays involving country characters, look at wood prints of agricultural life, and commentary by religious figures on rural social behavior.

Conversely, if you were working on visual representations of daily life in London, you might work up the economic history of the time and place.

10. If the source does in fact settle your exact question, you have to formulate a new one. But the question your source asked is probably not as close to yours as you first feared.