

Doing Primary Research



So, you have a great idea for research. Now what do you do? Actually, the Library is a great place to start before you come to the Archives.

Check the Library

Begin your research by reading quickly through the available secondary sources – books, journal articles, etc. – that may be relevant to your topic. Then, **form a question to drive your research.**

Look for References

Check the works cited. Are there citations that will help with your research? Are relevant primary sources cited? (i.e., original documents, photographs, etc.) Can these primary sources be found in the Acadia Archives?

Prepare for Archives

Come to the Kirkconnell Room. Bring with you your question, secondary sources that direct you to primary sources, and your ideas about primary sources that may be found at Acadia.

Plan Your Time

Plan to spend up to an hour on your first visit to the Kirkconnell Room. Staff are always in the Room to help. You may also wish to make an appointment to discuss your research with an Archivist.

Critical questioning

Thinking historically requires asking critical questions about the past. The Historical Thinking Project presents six, basic questions and concepts:

1. *Historical Perspectives*
How can we ever understand the past?
2. *Primary Source Evidence*
How do we know what we know about the past?
3. *Historical Significance*
How do we decide what and whose stories to tell?
4. *Ethical Dimensions of History*
What do historical injustices and sacrifices mean for us today?
5. *Continuity and Change*
Does change always mean progress?
6. *Cause and Consequence*
What are the causes that are hidden from view?

Historical Thinking Concept Templates

<http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-thinking-concept-templates>

Forming a question to drive your research

If you are having trouble writing a question, you are not alone. There are guides to help, such as The Historian's Toolbox by Robert Williams, which outlines possible questions on page 54:

- How or why did an event happen?
- What were the consequences of a particular event?
- What was the cultural context of an event?
- Was an individual responsible for a certain act?
- What are the broad trends in a society at particular time?

Refining a question

Don't worry about your question being too broad or too specific, it will likely change as you research deeper into your topic. You may also find that your question will change to a new direction. **Remember this—the question is important because it will keep you focused.**

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Using the Archives is easy – Get prepared in advance

Using the Archives is easy when you have prepared for your visit. This checklist can help you get organized in advance of your visit to the reading room.

How to prepare for using archival documents

- Become familiar with the Archival Research Guide (libguides.acadiau.ca/archivalresearch).
- Know the hours for using the reading room as they are different than the Library.
- Contact the staff in advance (archives@acadiau.ca) and tell us a bit about your research.
- Plan to spend at least 30 minutes or more on your first visit.
- If you have an assignment, bring it with you.
- Bring your research question(s) with you.
- Search for your subject in the Library's catalogue before visiting. (library.acadiau.ca)
- Bring any call numbers/book titles that you found on the catalogue.
- Bring a list of the subjects that you searched for in the catalogue.
- Bring your secondary sources with you.



What to expect at the Archives

If you have not used the Archives before, you may be wondering what to expect. These points can help.

What to expect when you visit

- Archives and Special Collections sources can only be used in the Kirkconnell Room.
- Staff are available in the room to help you with archival sources and special collections.
- You will be asked questions about your topic and the sources that you have already checked.
- You will need to complete a few, short forms during your visit.
- Investigating sources takes time – come prepared to spend time doing research.
- Staff will gather many, possible sources for you to use in the reading room.
- You will be reviewing various types of documents – letters, newspapers, photographs, etc.
- Staff will not do research for you or interpret sources on your behalf.
- Sources cannot be borrowed, but they can be set aside as a 'hold' for your next visit.
- Staff will do photocopying for you – at a cost.
- Large tables with lots of seating are available in the reading room.
- The reading room is not a quiet area.
- The reading room is wireless.
- Pencils are provided. Pens and highlighters are not allowed.
- Food and drink are not allowed in the reading room.