

What Is Research?

Let's begin finding an answer to this question by examining a couple of dictionary definitions. According to the online *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Research (the noun) means -- A search or investigation directed to the discovery of some fact by careful consideration or study of a subject; a course of critical or scientific inquiry.

Research (the verb) means -- To search into (a matter or subject); to investigate or study closely. Also, to engage in research upon (a subject, a person, etc.).



We can glean from the above two definitions that research is a serious activity, an important activity, that involves scientific method, close investigation, and critical analysis. Not to be taken lightly, research aims to discover new information about a topic as the researcher explores all existing information on the topic.

So the act of researching is an essential one that can lead to better understanding of how things work and to the invention of new ways of doing things and new means for doing things. It should be obvious, then, why research is regarded with such seriousness at academic institutions. The person performing research must have the desire to discover, the stamina to persevere, and the intellectual curiosity to pursue information, even when that information is elusive or nearly impossible to discover.

So, what is a researcher? We'll turn again to the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary*:

A Researcher is -- One who devotes himself to scientific or literary research (esp. as contrasted with one whose time is chiefly occupied in teaching or directly remunerative work).

So, the researcher must be devoted to his or her field of inquiry and is not merely a casual inquirer looking for momentary diversion. While not every academic researcher is necessarily a devotee of a subject, most academics have developed a faculty who are devotees and who promote discovery and invention. Students who do research may not always take on an assigned research project, for example, with the same seriousness or enthusiasm that their professors exhibit, but student researchers can be and are contributors to their professors' specialties by doing their assigned projects. Whether a student realizes it or not, that semester-long project that deprived him or her of hours of leisure time is actually potentially worth more than just a grade: it may very well lead an expert in the field to think differently about his or her chosen field and to make further valuable discoveries. And, if the student does become completely enamored of the subject during the process of researching, the project may be the inspiration that leads the student to also become an expert in the field.

So the process of research is a very essential one, one that rates high importance, and is furthered by academic institutions' faculty and students. Academies are not the only organizations, however, that sponsor and promote research. Many private organizations and government bodies also promote and

encourage research in fields as diverse as medicine and history and art and technology. With so many organizations involved in research, with so many thousands and millions of people involved in doing research projects, it would seem that there would be little left to research at this point. Not so. As researchers delve further into their fields of expertise, they often find that previously held concepts need revision or need to be completely rethought. Potentially, then, any field of inquiry is open to discovery, is researchable.

Researchable means -- Worthy of being researched; suitable for methodical investigation.

Source: *Oxford English Dictionary*

The Place of Libraries in the Research Process

Libraries play a central role in providing researchers with access to materials relevant to their inquiries. They do this not only by providing access to materials in print and in other storable media, but also by providing access to electronic collections of materials and by acting on the behalf of researchers who need materials from other libraries. No single library will have everything that a researcher needs for laying the groundwork for a project, but all libraries do have the capability of borrowing materials from other libraries that do have the needed resources.

As a researcher begins gathering information for a project, he or she will likely want to review any existing research that is similar or is relevant to the project. This is normally referred to as a literature review. Academic research papers often make use of the literature review as a jumping off point for discussion of original ideas or new directions. The completeness of the review depends on the scope of the project. A research paper done for a single academic course will likely not need an extensive literature review to succeed, whereas a thesis or doctoral dissertation should be based on a thorough review of the existing literature.

Libraries facilitate the literature review process by providing researchers with indexing and abstracting systems that help to identify available materials by subject and by author. These systems may be available in printed or electronic format, but most libraries have made a considerable investment in providing access to electronic systems because of their accessibility and flexibility. These systems provide researchers with the means to review other researchers' work fairly quickly and to decide which materials they should become familiar with before proceeding with their own projects.

Depending on the size and type of library, some of the materials identified in a search will be available in the library. Academic libraries tend to have more research-oriented collections than do public libraries, but the size of the library will also have an impact on just how much material will actually be available. Regardless of how much a researcher actually finds in his or her library, there will always be something not available that should be included in a literature review. Fortunately, libraries have developed a cooperative system amongst themselves for sharing resources. Interlibrary loan makes it possible for a researcher in Jacksonville to request from any library in the United States materials that are not available locally. Some larger research institutions also request international loans or copies, creating, in essence, a world library with nearly limitless resources.

Libraries, then, are integral parts of the research process, providing researchers with the wherewithal to identify and procure background materials needed to successfully launch a research project.