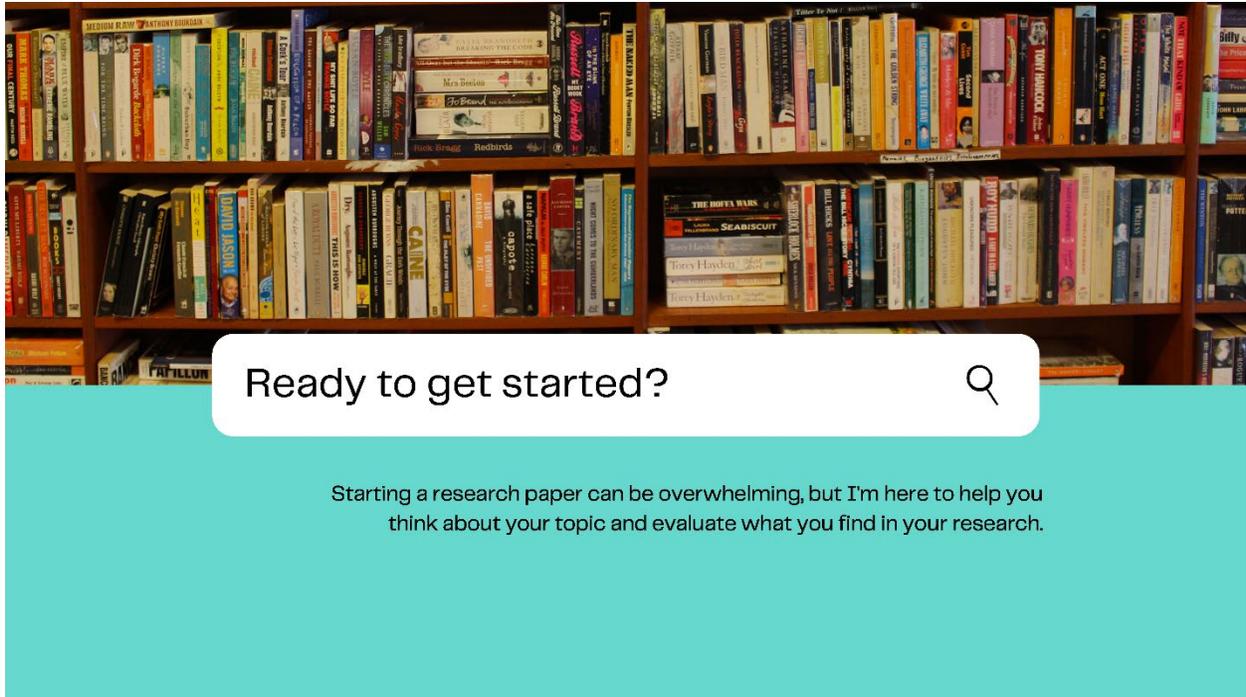Text on slide/audio: Congratulations! You get to write a research paper! Now what?

Ready to get started? 🔍

Starting a research paper can be overwhelming, but I'm here to help you
think about your topic and evaluate what you find in your research.

Text on slide: Ready to get started? Starting a research paper can be overwhelming, but I'm here to help you think about your topic and evaluate what you find in your research.

Audio: I am here to talk to you about some ways to find resources and get a start on that assignment.

Who am I? And why should you trust me?

Joanna Russell Bliss

RESEARCH & USER EXPERIENCE INTERN, FONDREN LIBRARY, SMU

Background

I am completing my second year of graduate school in library science, and I also have a BA and MA in literature, as well as a BS in education.

Research Experience

Returning to graduate school almost 20 years after my first MA has been a crash course in the field of electronic research. Over the last 15 months, I've been going through the exact same research process as you to write papers for grad school.

Text on slide: Who am I? And why should you trust me?

Joanna Russell Bliss, Research & User Experience Intern, Fondren Library, SMU [slide includes a photograph of the presenter]

Background: I am completing my second year of graduate school in library science, and I also have a BA and MA in literature, as well as a BS in education.
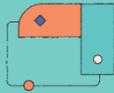
Research experience: Returning to graduate school almost 20 years after my first MA has been a crash course in the field of electronic research. Over the last 15 months, I've been going through the exact same process as you to write papers for grad school.

Audio: A little about myself. While I've worked for a long time in marketing and website management, I returned to grad school in the fall of 2019 to earn a Master's degree in library science. It's not my first Master's degree, but the field of research and scholarship has completely changed since I earned my MA in 2002. I have had a crash course in electronic research, working as an intern at SMU and doing my assignments for graduate school – I've been going through this same process as I do my own research and writing.
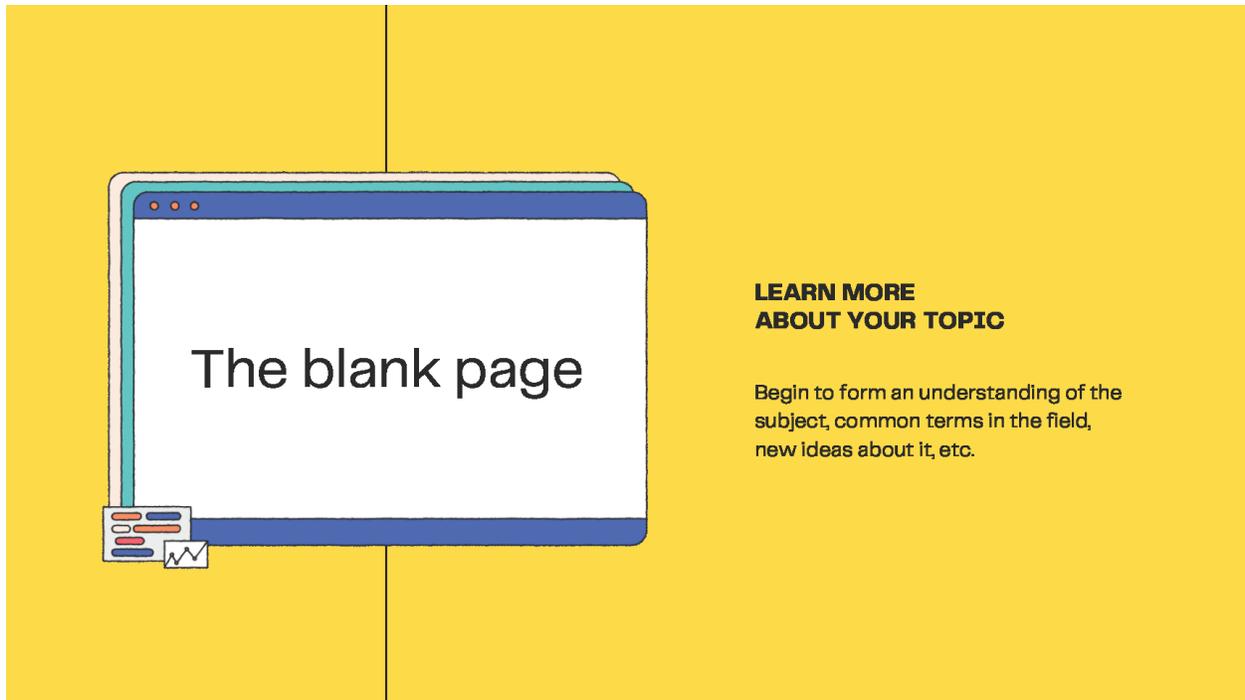
What we'll talk about today

The blank page

How should I start researching my topic? Where do I begin?

Search results

How do I evaluate what I'm finding? How do I judge when I've found the right resources?

Refining your topic/position

How do I take what I've found and turn that into a research paper?

Text on slide/audio: So what are we going to talk about today?

- **The blank page.** How should I start researching my topic? Where do I begin?
- **Search results.** How do I evaluate what I'm finding? How do I judge when I've found the right resources?
- **Refining your topic/position.** How do I take what I've found and turn that into a research paper?

The blank page

LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR TOPIC

Begin to form an understanding of the subject, common terms in the field, new ideas about it, etc.

Text on slide: The blank page. Learn more about your topic; begin to form an understanding of the subject, common terms in the field, new ideas about it, etc.

Audio: As you start to consider your topic and assignment, one of the things that will help you is learning more about it. What are some ways to do that?

Background research

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THE TOPIC?

Google search

If your topic is unfamiliar to you, search for definitions of the idea

Text on slide: Background research: Where can I learn more about the topic?

Google search: If your topic is unfamiliar to you, search for definitions of the idea.

Audio: Yes, Google search. Look at Wikipedia. Learn more about the most basic ideas of your topic. For example, I worked with a student last week who needed to discuss whether the idea of community is important to the characters in *The Matrix*. In order to be able to argue for or against that idea, you'd need to define what community **is.** Doing some background research to understand the concept of community will help you a) understand the concept and b) refine your research.

Background research

Google search

If your topic is unfamiliar to you, search for definitions of the idea

Everything search

Search for the topic in the library catalog

Text on slide: Same as previous slide, with the following addition:

Everything search: Search for the topic in the library catalog.

Audio: Another way to do this is to search for the topic in our everything search at the library catalog. So you pull up the library website (smu.edu/libraries) and you see a big search box. If you search for "community" in that box, what will you find? 8 million results. That's a lot. So you start thinking about the topic. What other words might scholars or professors use when discussing the idea of community (or its opposite)?

- Society
- Compassion
- Individualism

Start searching for related terms or combine them to see what results you get, like "society and compassion" or "society vs. individualism". Scroll through the results and start to see if any of the titles appeal to you.

Think of the research process as a way to learn more about this topic. What do you want to know more about? What titles sound interesting to you?

If you find a title that's interesting, open its listing in the catalog. You'll see a list of subject headers that can be used to find similar articles and books.

If you can open the resource online, you can read through it and see if you agree or disagree with what's being said. And look at the bibliography to find similar resources on the topic.

7

Background research

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT THE TOPIC?

Google search
If your topic is unfamiliar to you, search for definitions of the idea

Research guides
Once you're familiar with the idea, look in more targeted places

Everything search
Search for the topic in the library catalog

Text on slide: Same as previous slide, with the following addition:

Research guides: One you're familiar with the idea, look in more targeted places.

Audio: As you become more familiar with the topic, see if we have a research guide on the subject. Our librarians have built guides that will point you to databases on specific fields of research, allowing you to narrow your search to researchers in those fields.

The more you search, the more you will find about your topic, and the clearer your topic and the form of your paper will become. For example, your "everything search" can give you clues about keywords to use and what research guides may be helpful.

Image on slide: Screen grab search result for "society and compassion."

Text in upper left of slide: Search reminder: Scroll in the left grey bar area to see subject categories. You can also filter any of these sections to limit for publication date, type of resource, availability online, etc.

Audio: Take a look at this search result for "society and compassion." Look at the top here, where it says the search results include "empathy." Now we have a new keyword to add to our list.

If you're not sure about what research guide would be helpful, look at the "subject" areas here in the left column – are you thinking about "community" from a social sciences approach? Or how humans act in a community – maybe Psychology?

Image on slide: Screen grab of resource listing for "From Mindfulness to Heartfulness: Transforming Self and Society with Compassion."

Text in lower right of slide: Search reminders: If the resource says "Available online," use the link under "View online" to open it in a new window. Scroll down to see the subject headers and learn more keywords.

Audio: Since we're looking at our catalog, here's a reminder of what you'll see if you click on a resource title. The buttons at the top can be used to save or share the resource information. As you scroll down and see more of the listing, you'll see if you can access if online, and then the subject headers I mentioned earlier.

Text on slide: Common problems: Topic selection and background research

Trying to create the "best" topic: It's nearly impossible to create a "best" topic. Think of your topic as a starting point, not something that can be controlled.

Can't make sense of what you're finding in your background searches: Try different keywords to find articles that are more basic, and with less jargon.

Audio: There are a couple of common problems when deciding on a topic and doing background research.

Unfortunately, it's nearly impossible to create a "best" topic. Try to think of your topic as a starting point, not something that can be controlled. Don't limit your topic to the first thing you consider. Remember that topics develop – they are not chosen. Adapt your topic as you search and learn more about it.

Start with a basic topic idea and start searching – use this for background searches to find a topic that interests you. This will most likely lead you down a path that you can develop into a paper. If you feel like you're not getting anywhere, consider rethinking your topic or how you're approaching it.

If you're having a hard time understanding what you're finding, you're probably finding very high-level research on your topic. Try different keywords to find articles that are more basic, and with less jargon.
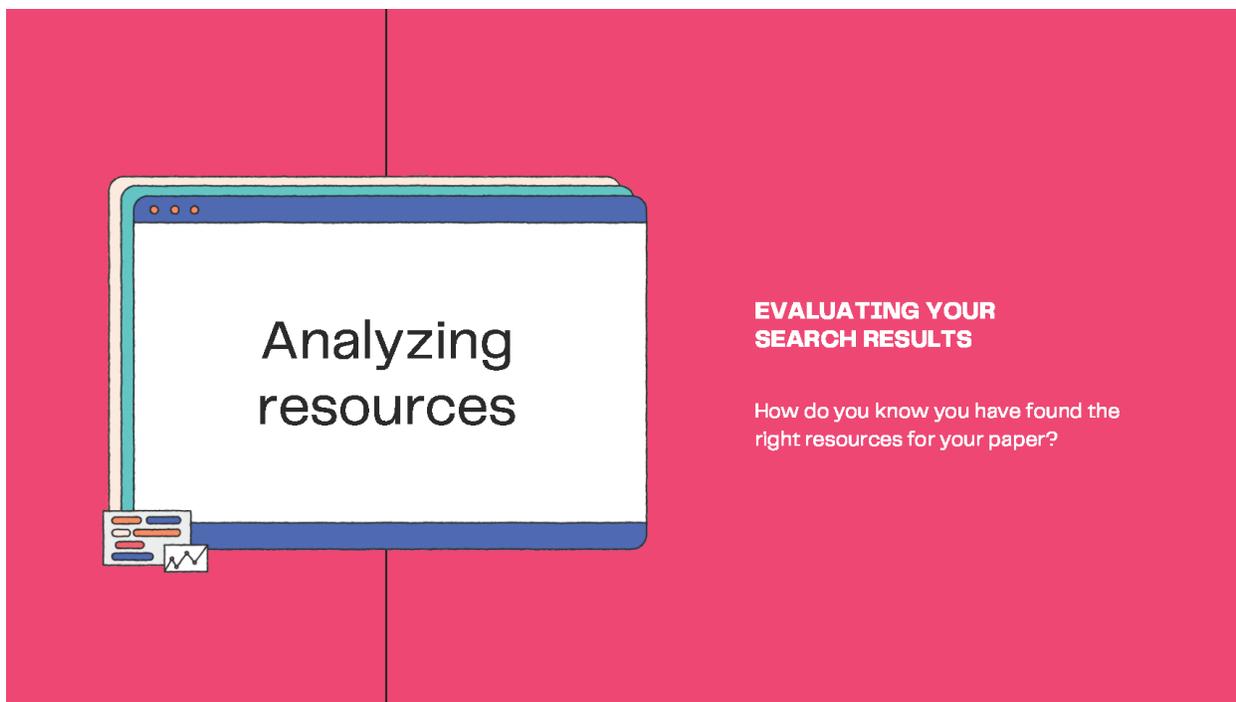
Text on slide: Analyzing your resources

Evaluating your search results: How do you know you have found the right resources for your paper?

Audio: Analyzing your resources

So you've got some articles that seem intriguing. Let's look at them one at a time and ask these questions.

Analyzing your resources

Who

Take a look at the authors. Have they written a lot on this topic? Are they affiliated with a university? Why are they an "expert" on this topic? Have other scholars cited the paper?

Text on slide: Analyzing your resources. Who: Take a look at the authors. Have they written a lot on this topic? Are they affiliated with a university? Why are they an "expert" on this topic? Have other scholars cited the paper?

Audio: Who wrote this paper and why are they an expert on the topic? Do a quick search to see how many papers they have published or whether this particular paper has been cited – as a good example or a bad one.

This is why I mentioned my credentials when I introduced myself. I might be qualified to talk to you about research or literature, but I'm probably not the right person to talk to about how to repair a heart valve or build a server network. It's not just "Does this person have a Ph.D. or M.D." but "Is their research related to this paper?"

Analyzing your resources

Who

Take a look at the authors. Have they written a lot on this topic? Are they affiliated with a university? Why are they an "expert" on this topic? Have other scholars cited the paper?

What

How have they structured their argument? Did they do a study? Or a review of other studies?

Text on slide: Same as previous slide, with the following addition:

What: How have they structured their argument? Did they do a study? Or a review of other studies?

Audio: What is the paper based on? Did they do research, like a study or a literature review? How big was the sample? (Small samples can often skew the results.)

Analyzing your resources

Who

Take a look at the authors. Have they written a lot on this topic? Are they affiliated with a university? Why are they an "expert" on this topic? Have other scholars cited the paper?

What

How have they structured their argument? Did they do a study? Or a review of other studies?

Where

Where did they publish? Is it peer-reviewed or in an established journal?

Text on slide: Same as previous slide, with the following addition:

Where: Where did they publish? Is it peer-reviewed or in an established journal?

Audio: And where was the paper published – what journal or publication?

Keep in mind too that the old way of publishing research – submitting to peer-reviewed journals – also kept a lot of researchers OUT of these venues. A person with a Ph.D. and working at Harvard is still capable of writing a paper that is not well-founded. A person working on a degree (and previously unpublished) might only be able to publish her on a blog or personal website. So there are not right or wrong answers to these questions – they are something to consider as you evaluate the resources.

This is also something to remember as you take these skills into the workplace after you earn your degree. Are you going to have to make a presentation on thematic points in a popular movie? Probably not. But you will need to consider where to find trustworthy information and how to evaluate its arguments when putting together business proposals or reports.
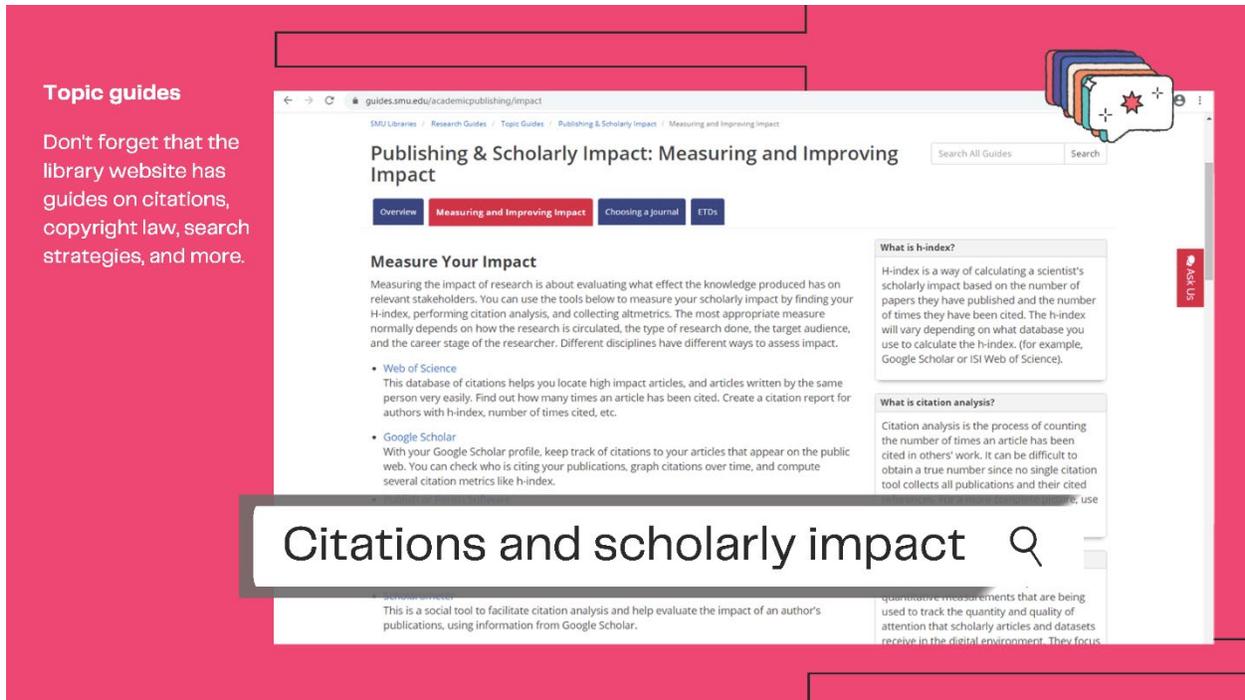
Image on slide: Screen grab of research guide on "Publishing and Scholarly Impact: Measuring and Improving Impact."

Text in upper left of slide: Topic guides: Don't forget that the library website has guides on citations, copyright law, search strategies, and more.

Audio: I mentioned whether a paper or author has been cited as one way to measure expertise. This research guide is aimed at professors who are publishing, but the tools on this page can be used by researchers too. Note that different tools are helpful for measuring citation based on the field of research – Web of Science is good for, well, science, while Google Scholar is good for humanities-based research.

I also wanted to point out that, like this guide, we have other topic guides at the library website to help you as you're crafting your paper. These are tools you can use throughout the research and writing process.

Common
problems

RESOURCE EVALUATION

**Choosing unreliable or unhelpful resources**

Most sources found via SMU Libraries should be reliable. Beware of anything that doesn't use studies or research to back up claims.

Text on slide: Common problems: Resource evaluation

Choosing unreliable or unhelpful resources: Most sources found via SMU Libraries should be reliable. Beware of anything that doesn't use studies or research to back up claims.

Audio: Most sources found via SMU Libraries should be reliable. Beware of anything that doesn't use studies or research to back up claims.

Remember too to use our research guides to narrow your searches for resources related to your topic. If you find that upon further evaluation, they don't fit your approach, try searching a different database that falls in a different subject category.
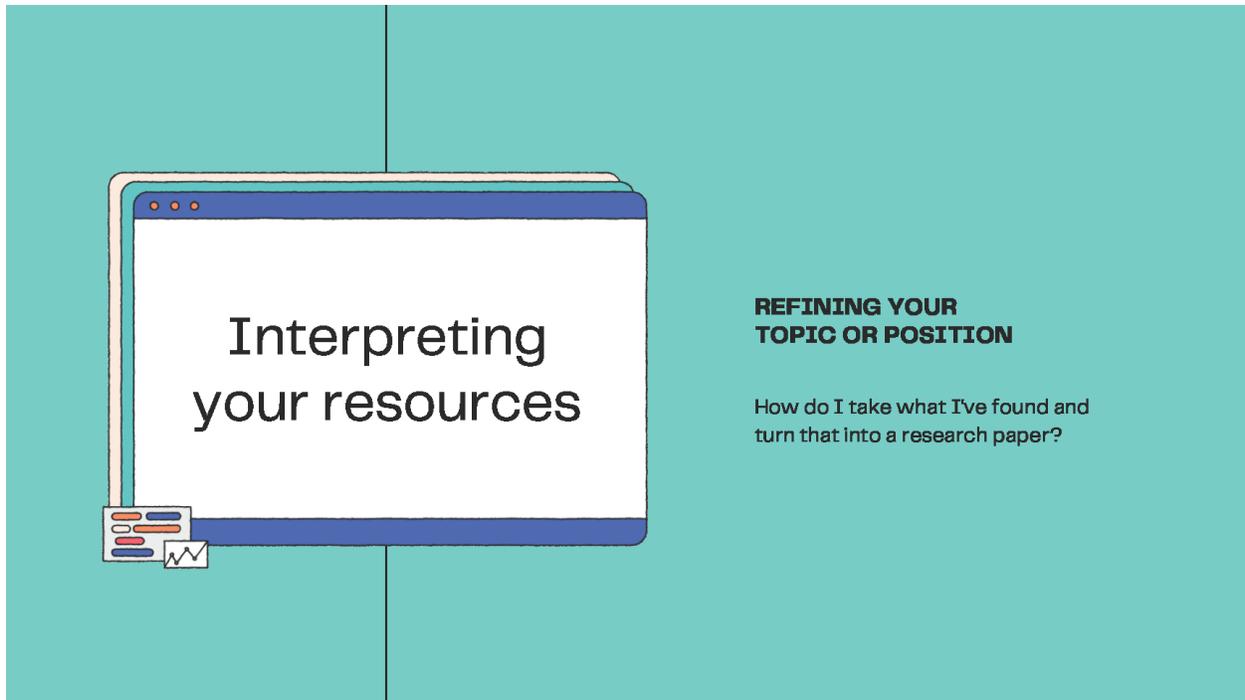
Text on slide: Interpreting your resources

Refining your topic or position: How do I take what I've found and turn that into a research paper?

Audio: Interpreting your resources. So you've thought about your topic, and you've found some resources on the subject. How can you turn that into a cohesive paper?
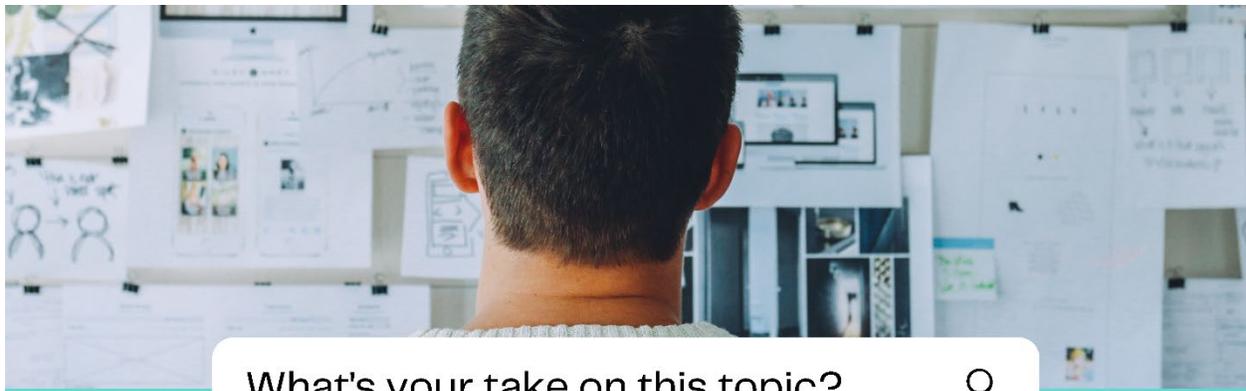
What's your take on this topic?

Remember that your position is your specific take on this topic. It's a new perspective on what you have found in your research, considering what others have already studied and written about. You're contributing to this scholarly conversation.

Text on slide: What's your take on this topic?

Audio: Now you need to consider:

- Is the information I've found relevant to my topic?
- Do the articles tie in to the position I'm considering? How?

Text and audio: Remember that your position is your specific take on this topic. It's a new perspective on what you have found in your research, considering what others have already studied and written about. You're contributing to this scholarly conversation

Text on slide: Interpreting your resources.

Try not to think of your paper as a report, like "these experts say this."

Consider it a "synthesis," as explained by the Purdue Online Writing Lab (2020); emphasis mine.

> There are two types of syntheses: explanatory syntheses and argumentative syntheses. **Explanatory syntheses** seek to bring sources together to *explain a perspective and the reasoning behind it*. **Argumentative syntheses** seek to bring sources together to *make an argument*. Both types of synthesis involve looking for relationships between sources and drawing conclusions.

Audio: Rather than presenting a report ("the experts say this"), think of your paper as a synthesis of your research. This explanation comes from the Purdue Online Writing Lab, which has some great examples of how to think about your resources. A literature review is an example of an explanatory synthesis, where you're gathering several resources and identifying similar trends and where the articles or resources differ. An argumentative synthesis is one where you have to take a position, like the example I used at the beginning of this presentation – Is the idea of community important to the characters in *The Matrix*? Yes or no? How does your research inform your argument?

FINDING CONNECTIONS

Go through your resources to determine common ideas or threads.

Images on slide: Several different photographs of hands coming together.

Text on left of slide: Finding connections: Go through your resources to determine common ideas or threads.

Audio: You need to ask yourself what the common ideas or threads are in the resources you've found. Go through your resources and find common ideas or threads that link them together.

To use another example from the Purdue Online Learning Lab, If you were researching the pros and cons of encouraging healthy eating in children, you would want to separate your sources to find which ones agree with each other and which ones disagree.
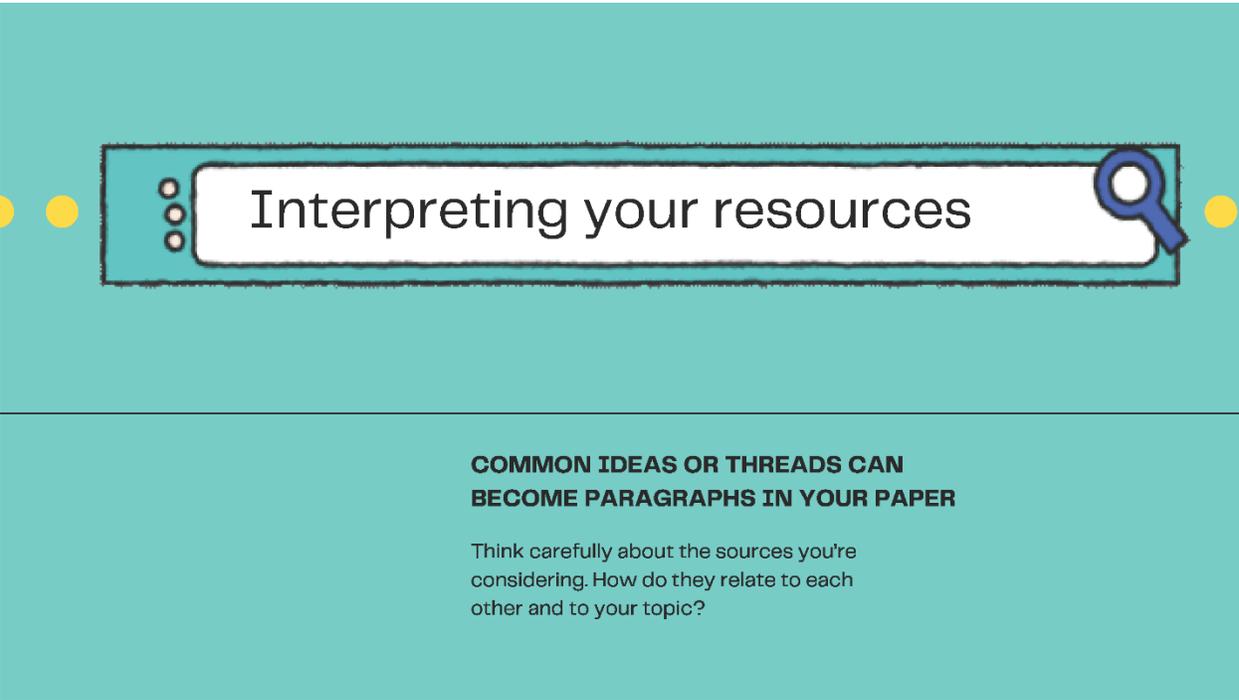
Interpreting your resources

COMMON IDEAS OR THREADS CAN BECOME PARAGRAPHS IN YOUR PAPER

Think carefully about the sources you're considering. How do they relate to each other and to your topic?

Text on slide: Interpreting your resources

Common ideas or threads can become paragraphs in your paper. Think carefully about the sources you're considering. How do they relate to each other and to your topic?

Audio: As you start seeing connections between your resources, those can lead to paragraphs in your paper. Just make sure that everything ties back to your main topic.

Common problems

INTERPRETING YOUR RESOURCES

Difficulty connecting your resources

If your resources do not relate to each other well, you may need to find more resources or rethink your topic.

Text on slide: Common problems: Interpreting your resources

Difficulty connecting your resources: If your resources do not relate to each other well, you may need to find more resources or rethink your topic.

Audio: If what you have found is not coming together well into a cohesive narrative or argument, consider if you need to find more resources or to rethink your topic.

Text on slide/Audio: Final thoughts

- **Your topic may change as you do your research.** Remember that as you begin the research process, that is when you know the least about your topic. As you search and read through results and resources, you will learn about it and refine your ideas.
- **Sometimes you need to re-search.** Research is not always a linear process. Sometimes you need to change keywords to broaden or limit your results. Sometimes you start looking through your resources and realize you don't have enough, or they don't relate to each other as you thought they would.
  That's OK. Give yourself the space (and time) to rethink and re-search, if necessary.
- **Research before you write.** Remember that writing should be the last part of this process, not the first. It's easier to craft a narrative out of several resources than to find that perfect article that matches what you've written.

Text on slide/Audio: And if you have questions… Ask!

- Email me at joannab@mail.smu.edu
- Make an appointment with me or another librarian to discuss your research
- Join us at the Research and Writing Lab on Tuesday from 4-5.30 or Wednesday from 11-12.30 to talk with both a librarian and a writing tutor.

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Purdue Online Writing Lab. (2020). Synthesizing sources. Purdue University. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/research_overview/synthesizing_sources.html

Images and design template courtesy of Canva

Text on slide: References

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Purdue Online Writing Lab. (2020). *Synthesizing sources.* Purdue University. https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/research_overview/synthesizing_sources.html

Audio: Good luck, and don't forget to cite your resources!