How to start researching your essay

After analysing your question, you can begin researching that question, gathering relevant sources and extracting relevant ideas from those sources. But, remember your purpose: it is expected that your essay will answer the question by providing a strong and persuasive academic argument, that explores the central issues raised in the literature, and is supported by evidence from quality sources.

1. Use course materials

Essay questions challenge you to select and apply some of the key ideas, concepts, principles and theories in your course. For example, the second year Anthropology course “Indigenous Australians and Australian Society” has as one of its essay questions:

*Explain the role of the liberal welfare state in Indigenous Australian affairs and evaluate the effects on Indigenous life worlds.*

Search first within your course: the lectures, relevant readings or recommended readings, even your course outline will provide an overview of the key ideas of the course. While it is unusual to use lecture notes or course outlines as sources in your essay, they are great places to gather a general understanding of your topic. It is acceptable to use articles which may have been copied explicitly (in full or in part) for your course, but reference the original source not the course material.

2. Identify starting points

It is rarely acceptable to limit your sources just to those provided by the lecturer. While the Anthropology course above recommends a range of journals, websites and readings divided into topics, not all courses do this. It is expected that you will read more widely to identify a range of different positions, theoretical approaches or ways of gathering evidence relevant to the question. It is not sufficient to search the general internet, or just “Google” it. You may use Wikipedia as a starting point to gain some background information, but it is neither reliable nor academically credible.

3. Use Search engines

Use a discipline-specific database search engine that searches scholarly journals for relevant articles. The ANU Library runs courses on how to search databases. Your lecturer and tutor can also assist by advising you on useful search engines for your discipline, eg Anthropology lecturers recommend the library of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies as an essential resource for their course. The National Library of Australia is also very useful.

N.B. While Google is not an academically reliable search engine, Google Scholar is, as it searches peer-reviewed journals.

4. Consult journal articles

Articles from respected journals - that is, the journals that one might find in a university library - provide access to the most recent publications in an area. Relevant Anthropology journals for the essay used above might include Aboriginal History, Anthropological Forum or Australian Aboriginal Studies. However government reports, statistical sources such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics, reports from non-government organisations, consultants
and others are also useful as long as their limitations are appreciated, that is, they all have an agenda and select information to promote that agenda.

5. Select sources carefully

Select your sources carefully. Beware of being overwhelmed by too much information and too many readings - a simple search for “globalisation” on Google Scholar, for instance, returns 336,000 hits. You only need sufficient sources to construct a strong argument within the word limit given: too many other people’s ideas will fill your essay and overwhelm your argument; too few and you will not identify all the central issues or perspectives.

6. Be strategic in your reading

1. Use a rule of thumb - the rule of two. If your essay is 2,000 words long, divide the first two numbers by two and that is the minimum number of sources acceptable in constructing an essay. That is, for 2,000 words, find 10 sources minimum; for 1,500, find seven or eight; for 3000, find 15.

However to identify ten relevant and useful sources for a 2,000 word essay you may need to find 20 or 25 possible sources in your search. There are ways to limit the time spent on reading these sources.

2. Read with purpose - never read anything without knowing the purpose for which you are reading. Your analysis of your essay question generates questions, and your reading is directed by these questions.

For the Anthropology essay example above, some questions to bring to the text might be:

- what are the elements of a “liberal welfare state”?
- are there different positions on its effects on Indigenous people?
- in what ways might these positions differ? And so on.

3. Scan - unless you are reading for a literature course, avoid reading from the first word to the last. Look at the table of contents and search the index for relevant sections (use keywords such as “Indigenous,” “welfare state,” “life worlds” and so on). For journal articles, start by reading the abstract - an abstract is the 150-250 words that precede a journal article that succinctly tells the reader the purpose, the approach, the findings and the contribution of the article. With your key questions or concepts in mind you can scan many sources quickly.

4. Use sub-headings - narrow your reading still further by checking out how many sections/sub-headings the source is broken into - this will tell you how many main ideas the text contains. Read the topic sentence (generally the first sentence) in each paragraph - this will give you a sense of the line of argument/reasoning in the text and assist in narrowing the sections you choose to read in depth. Also read the introduction and conclusion in depth.

5. Take control of your argument - the purpose of these strategies is to give you control over your sources. Your purpose is to write an essay that answers your question(s), not to reproduce what another author says about their question/problem/issue.