

The most valuable lesson I have learned about the research process while an undergrad is that you are flying blind through most of it, and you can really have no certainty on where the process will lead. More than anything, it requires patience and a grain of salt because you have to realize that you can't find all the answers, that though you could always have done more, you have to work with what you got.

When I started this project, I had a fair idea of what topics I wanted to work with, and had abstract ideas about what the themes would be. The paper was a term project for my history capstone course on the English Civil War, and with that, I knew I wanted to write something involving colonial America at that time, and the idea that the Puritans who came over were conservative. Milton and the Classics were also on my mind, since I have a strong Latin and Greek background. Thus I come up with the themes of what I want to study, before I come up with what I actually want to study. I always felt that my abstracts and initial notes were somewhat superficial, but you have to take baby steps at this phase.

When I do start to research, I go first for the most general monographs or studies I can find, whether popular biographies, introductions to scholarly texts, encyclopedic sources, and take note whenever a primary source is mentioned, or a theme I want to focus on. At this point I begin a notebook dedicated to this purpose, using it mostly for notes on articles, quotes, and rough sketches which help me set up ideas. I've found this to be the most effective way to keep detailed information as well as keeping a perfectly linear record of how I'm proceeding, something which has saved me more than once. I tend to be very conscious of the time period a source is written in; getting the historiography down is key to understanding the topic for me, a crucial for forming my own ideas.

When it comes to looking for primary sources, I try to spend as much time paging through obscure sources to see what I find. Microfilm is still the most effective way to do this, not only because it is linear, but because a lot is collected which might not otherwise be re-issued digitally. It is this practice which really helps me to see the flaws in my original ideas, if only because you get a better sense of what is going on, and some of the questions which I thought could be good thesis statements, are in fact general questions which can be quickly answered and incorporated into the backbone of the paper itself, or incorporated into the larger theme. This is also a quick way to determine what sources are relevant or not. It is at this phase that I compile a personal bibliography of the important primary and secondary sources.

I often start off with lofty goals, and the whole research process is an attempt to trim these down to size. The most difficult part of selecting primary sources is that, as alluded to above, is knowing when to stop collecting, because I am never quite sure if I have enough, or if the ones I have are adequate. I'll incorporate new sources right until the end. I found my most important sources, such as Thomas Hutchinson's history of the Massachusetts Bay and many of the letters of Roger Williams I used, during the last week of research. I have no formal rubric for what sources I do or don't use, but as much as possible, I try to correlate different sources as much as possible, and "fit" them together in the proper context. One of my greatest fears has always been overstating the importance of any source, or misinterpreting a source.

Working closely with my professor gave me confidence I wouldn't have had, and helped me to form my ideas, which I felt were abstract at the beginning, with a more tenable purpose. She has a wide information and contact base to work from, and she could give me names and books to look for specifically on the themes I had in mind, as well as doing basic searches with me. She also gave our class a strong introduction to the historiographical trends of this topic.

But she also gave practical advice, which I feel often gets overlooked. One thing she stressed was to not be afraid to “kill the baby” so to speak, not to be afraid to delete things if they are not working out, as hard as that might be. For instance, I had originally wanted to write a paper which focused more on Milton and the first century historian Cornelius Tacitus. That historian shared an ideological kinship with Milton which seemed interesting, and having studied Tacitus a few years back, I was eager to pursue this. But as I focused my research on figures like Henry Vane, which led more closely to New England and Roger Williams, I simply could not discuss many of the ideas which I originally had planned, and in many cases already wrote. Writing this current paper involved two complete revisions.

Research involves restraint. We simply cannot look up or spend as much time as we would like to on any given topic. Having the ability to work closely on a topic which correlates to my focus in early American history gave me practical experience I would not have gained any other way. This project has given me a good sense of where my interests in this area lay, and a firm footing from which to proceed.