# How Proper Online Research Works

Legitimate methods, suggested techniques, good sense, and plenty of patience

*http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/navigatingthenet/tp/How-to-Properly-Research-Online.htm*

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**Legitimate** [**online research**](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/searchenginehandbook/tp/Internet-Research-for-Beginners.htm) **involves much more than 10 seconds with Google and copy-pasting the Wikipedia links.** [Legitimate research](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/navigatingthenet/tp/Web-Research-Is-Called-RE-SEARCH-for-a-Reason.htm) is called ***RE*-search** for a reason: patient repetition and careful filtering of drivel is the secret of success!  
  
There are over 86 billion web pages published, and most of those pages are not worth quoting. To successfully sift it all, you must use consistent and reliable filtering methods. You will need patience to see the full breadth of writing on any single topic. And you will need your critical thinking skills to disbelieve anything until it is intelligently validated.

If you are a student, or if you are seeking serious medical, professional, or historical information, definitely heed these 8 suggested steps to researching online:

**1.  Decide if the Topic Is 'Hard Research', 'Soft Research', or Both.**

'Hard' and 'soft' research have different expectations of data and proof.  You should know the hard or soft nature of your topic to point your search strategy where it will yield the most reliable research results.

**A) '**[**Hard research**](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/searchenginehandbook/f/hard_vs_soft_internet_research.htm)**'** describes scientific and objective research, where proven facts, figures, statistics, and measurable evidence are absolutely critical. In hard research, the credibility of every resource must be able to withstand intense scrutiny.

**B) '**[**Soft research**](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/searchenginehandbook/f/hard_vs_soft_internet_research.htm)**'** describes topics that are more subjective, cultural, and opinion-based.  Soft research sources will be less scrutinized by the readers.

**C)** [**Combined soft and hard research**](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/searchenginehandbook/f/hard_vs_soft_internet_research.htm)requires the most work, because this hybrid topic broadens your search requirements.  Not only do you need to find hard facts and figures, but you will need to debate against very strong opinions to make your case.  Politics and international economy topics are the biggest examples of hybrid research.

[Here are examples of hard vs. soft Internet research](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/searchenginehandbook/f/hard_vs_soft_internet_research.htm). ..

**2.  Choose Which Online Authorities Are Suitable for Your Research Topic.**

**A) Hard research topics require hard facts and academically-respected evidence.**  An opinion blog will not cut it; you will need to find publications by scholars, experts, and professionals with credentials. [The Invisible Web will often be important for](http://netforbeginners.about.com/library/diagrams/n4layers.htm) hard research.  Accordingly, here are possible content areas for your hard research topic:

1. Academic journals  (e.g.  [a list of academic search engines here](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_academic_databases_and_search_engines)).
2. Government publications (e.g. Google's '[Uncle Sam](http://www.google.com/unclesam)' search).
3. Government authorities (e.g. the [NHTSA](http://www.nhtsa.gov/))
4. Scientific and medical content, sanctioned by known authorites (e.g. Scirus.com).
5. Non-government websites that are NOT influenced by advertising and obvious sponsorship e.g. [Consumer Watch](http://www.consumerwatch.com/))
6. Archived news (e.g. [Internet Archive](http://www.archive.org/))

**B) Soft research topics are often about collating the opinions of respected online writers.** Many soft research authorities are not academics, but rather writers who have practical experience in their field. Soft research usually means the following sources:

1. Blogs, including personal opinion blogs and amateur writer blogs (e.g. [ConsumerReports](http://blogs.consumerreports.org/cars/), [UK politics](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog)).
2. Forums and discussion sites (e.g. [Police](http://forums.officer.com/forums/) discussion forum)
3. Consumer product review sites (e.g. ZDnet, [Epinions](http://www.epinions.com/)).
4. Commercial sites that are advertising-driven (e.g. About.com)
5. Tech and computer sites  (e.g.[Overclock.net](http://www.overclock.net/)).

**3.  Use Different Search Engines and Keywords**

Now comes the primary legwork: using different [search engines](http://websearch.about.com/od/s/g/search_engine.htm) and using 3-5 [keyword](http://webdesign.about.com/od/seoglossary/g/keywords.htm) combinations. Patient and constant adjusting of your keywords are key here.

1. **Firstly, start with broad initial researching**at [Internet Public Library](http://ipl.org/), [DuckDuckGo](http://duckduckgo.com), [Clusty/Yippy](http://clusty.com/), [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org), and [Mahalo](http://www.mahalo.com/). This will give you a broad sense of what categories and related topics are out there, and give you possible directions to aim your research.
2. **Secondly, narrow and deepen your Visible Web searching** with [Google](http://www.google.com) and [Ask.com](http://www.ask.com).  Once you have experimented with combinations of 3 to 5 different keywords, these 3 search engines will deepen the results pools for your keywords.
3. **Thirdly, go beyond Google, for** [**Invisble Web**](http://netforbeginners.about.com/library/diagrams/n4layers.htm) **(Deep Web) searching.** Because [Invisible Web pages](http://netforbeginners.about.com/cs/secondaryweb1/a/secondaryweb_2.htm) are not spidered by Google, you'll need to be patient and use slower and more specific [search engines](http://websearch.about.com/od/enginesanddirectories/ig/Search-Engine-Logo-Gallery/scirus-png.htm) like:

* [Scirus](http://www.scirus.com/srsapp/) (for scientific searching)
* [Internet Archive](http://www.archive.org/)  (to backwards-search past current events)
* [Advanced Clusty Searching](http://clusty.com/search?&form=advanced)  ([meta searching](http://websearch.about.com/od/enginesanddirectories/a/clusty_2.htm) specific parts of the Internet)
* [Surfwax](http://www.surfwax.com/) (much more knowledge-focused and much less commerce-driven than Google)
* [US Government Library of Congress](http://www.usa.gov/)

**4.  Bookmark and Stockpile Possible Good Content.**

While this step is simple, this is the second-slowest part of the whole process:  this is where we gather all the possible ingredients into organized piles, which we sift through later.  Here is the suggested routine for bookmarking pages:

1. [**CTRL-Click**](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/navigatingthenet/a/spawn_IE_windows.htm) the interesting search engine result links. This will spawn a [new tab page](http://browsers.about.com/od/googlechrome/ss/New-Tab-Page-In-Google-Chrome-For-Windows_4.htm) each time you CTRL-Click.
2. When you have 3 or 4 [new tabs](http://websearch.about.com/od/t/g/Tabbed-Browsing.htm), quickly browse them and do an initial assessment on their credibility.
3. Bookmark any tabs you consider credible on first glance.
4. Close the tabs.
5. Repeat with the next batch of links.

This method, after about 45 minutes, will have yielded you dozens of bookmarks to sift through.

**5.  Filter and Validate the Content.**

This is the slowest step of all: vetting and filtering which content is legitimate, and which is drivelous trash.  If you are doing hard research, this is also the most important step of all, because your resources MUST withstand close examination later.

1. **Carefully consider the author/source, and the date of publication.** Is the author an authority with professional credentials, or someone who is peddling their wares and trying to sell you a book? Is the page undated, or unusually old?  Does the page have its own [domain name](http://linux.about.com/cs/linux101/g/Domain_Name.htm) (e.g. honda.com, e.g. gov.co.uk), or is it some deep and obscure page buried at MySpace?
2. **Be suspicious of personal web pages, and any commercial pages that have a shoddy, amateurish presentation.** Spelling errors, [grammar errors](http://webdesign.about.com/od/grammar/a/common-spelling-errors.htm), poor formatting, cheesy advertising on the side, absurd fonts, too many blinking emoticons... these are all red flags that the author is not a serious resource, and does not care about the quality of their publishing.
3. **Be suspicious of scientific or medical pages that display scientific or medical advertising.** For example: if you are researching veterinarian advice, be wary if the veterinarian web page displays blatant advertising for dog medicine or pet food.  Advertising *can* *possibly* indicate a conflict of interest or hidden agenda behind the writer's content.
4. **Be suspicious of any ranting, overstating, overly-positive, or overly-negative commentary.** If the author insists on ranting and crying foul, or conversely seems to shower excessive praise, that could be a red flag that there is dishonesty and fraudulent motivations behind the writing.
5. **Commercial consumer websites can be good resources, but be skeptical of every comment you read**.  Just because 7 people rave that Pet Food X is good for their dogs does not necessarily mean it is good for your dog. Similarly, if 5 people out of 600 complain about a particular vendor, that doesn't mean the vendor is necessarily bad. Be patient, be skeptical, and be slow to form an opinion.
6. **Use your intuition if something seems amiss with the web page.**  Perhaps the author is just a little too positive, or seems a little too closed to other opinions.  Maybe the author uses profanity, name-calling, or insults to try to make his point.  The formatting of the page might seem childlike and haphazard.  Or you get the sense that the author is trying to sell you something.  If you get any subconcious sense that there is something not quite right about the web page, then trust your intuition.
7. **Use Google 'link:' feature to see the 'backlinks' for a page.**  This technique will list incoming hyperlinks from the major websites that recommend the web page of interest. These backlinks will give you an indicator how much respect the author has earned around the Internet.  Simply go to google and enter 'link:www.(the [web page's address](http://websearch.about.com/od/w/g/web-address.htm))' to see the backlinks listed.

**6.  Make a Final Decision on Which Argument You Now Support.**

After spending a few hours researching, your initial opinion may have changed.  Maybe you are relieved, maybe you are more afraid, maybe you've just learned something and opened your mind that much more.  Whichever it is, you will need to have an informed opinion if you are about to publish a report or thesis for your professor.

**If you have a new opinion, you might have to redo your research** (or re-sift your existing research bookmarks) in order to collate facts that support your new opinion and [thesis statement](http://homeworktips.about.com/od/thesissentence/a/How-Should-My-Thesis-Statement-Look.htm).

**7.  Quote and Cite the Content.**

While there is not a single universal standard for citing (acknowledging) quotes from the Internet,  the Modern Language Association and American Psychological Association are two very respected citing methods:

**Here is an example** [**MLA citation**](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/searchenginehandbook/a/proper_citing_of_internet_references.htm)**:**

*Aristotle. Poetics. Trans. S. H. Butcher. The Internet Classics Archive.  
Web Atomic and Massachusetts Institute of Technology,  
13 Sept. 2007. Web. 4 Nov. 2008. ‹http://classics.mit.edu/›.*

**Here is a sample** [**APA citation**](http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/searchenginehandbook/a/proper_citing_of_internet_references.htm)**:**

*Bernstein, M. (2002). 10 tips on writing the living Web. A  
List Apart: For People Who Make Websites, 149.  
Retrieved from* [*http://www.alistapart.com/articles/writeliving*](http://www.alistapart.com/articles/writeliving)

**Remember:** [**DO NOT PLAGIARIZE**](http://www.llrx.com/features/bloggersbeware.htm).  You must either directly quote the author, or rewrite and summarize the content (along with appropriate citing).  But to restate the author's words as your own is illegal, and will get you a failing mark on your thesis or paper.

**8.  Choose a Research-Friendly Web Browser**

Researching is repetitive and slow.  You will want a tool that supports many open pages, and easily backtracks through previous pages.  A good research-friendly Web browser offers:

1. Multiple tab pages open simultaneously.
2. Bookmarks/favorites that are fast and easy to manage.
3. Page history that is easy to recall.
4. Loads pages quickly for your computer's memory size.

**Of the many choices in 2014,** **the best research** [**browsers**](http://homebusiness.about.com/od/homebusinessglossar1/g/browser-defined.htm) **are** [**Chrome**](http://google.about.com/od/googlereviews/fr/ChromeFR.htm) **and** [**Firefox**](http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/firefox.html?from=getfirefox)**, followed by** [**Opera**](http://browsers.about.com/od/howtousewindowsbrowsers/a/operahelp.htm). IE10 is also a competent browser, but try the previous 3 choices for their speed and memory economy.

**9.  Good Luck with Your Internet Researching!**

Yes, it's *re*-searching....the slow and repetitive method of sifting good information from the bad. It should feel slow because it's about diligence and skeptical hard questioning.  But keep your attitude positive, and enjoy the discovery process.  While 90% of what you read you will discard, take pleasure in how funny (and how idiotic) some internet content is, and put your CTRL-Click tabs and your bookmark/favorites to good use.

Be patient, be skeptical, be curious, and be slow to form an opinion!