

Following the Secondary Source Trail

	Step One: What? When? Who?	Step Two: Figuring Out the Story: Information Gathering	Step Three: A “Conversation” with Historians
Purpose	In the beginning stages of your research, you are trying to find out what happened and when, who the key people are, what important events happened, etc. At this stage in your research, you might still be determining the exact focus of your research and narrowing your topic.	In the middle stages of your research, you will begin to understand your topic in more depth. By now, you go beyond what happened and when and begin to ask questions like why? how? what was the impact? what was the context? You have a working thesis.	When you reach the advanced stages of historical research, you seek to understand the perspectives, questions, and debates that historians have about your subject and its significance in history so that you can offer your own interpretation.
Types of Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encyclopedias (general and specialized, esp. historical) • Textbooks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Books on your topic • Historical books accessible to general public • Popular history magazines and basic periodicals • Biographies • Text in museum exhibit • Documentaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholarly books and dissertations • Scholarly articles • Interviews with scholars and other experts
Typical Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happened? When? • Who are the key people involved? • What’s happening around the same time that might help you understand why things happened as they did? • What are the keywords that will lead you to other sources? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did these events happen? • What are the causes and effects? • What were the various motivations, perspectives, and concerns of the people involved? • How does this story fit into the big picture? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What key questions do historians have about this topic in history • What do you think matters about this topic? What story are you going to tell? • What are the core issues and themes one must understand to make sense of this subject? • Why does this topic matter? • What is the long-term historical significance of this topic?
Examples	Encyclopedia of Chicago, History Database, Gale Virtual Knowledge, Biography in Context	Articles found through EBSCO, Encyclopedia of Chicago, Chicago History Magazine. The articles themselves and the books referenced are vital. Finding Aids and essays included in digital collections are important sources that are of a less academic reading level.	JSTOR: Journal of American History and other specialized journals.