

Conducting Effective Research for Art History Projects

The more effective the research, the more thoughtful and creative the project; it's that simple. Better research results in better design. The following tips focus on History of Art & Design I final problems, but they can be applied to almost any creative assignment.

Read the assignment instructions carefully, and ask for clarification of points you do not understand.

This is a college-level assignment; **use college-level resources**. That means no encyclopedias, no textbooks, no limiting research to abstracts of journal articles, and no random Google searches. Instead, consider the following:

Primary sources: Although you are required to use a particular translation of your chosen passage, that doesn't mean that you can't seek out alternate translations. All great literature is translated at least once every twenty years, so there are many different editions of Homer's epics, *Beowulf*, *Gilgamesh*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Seek them out to deepen your understanding of the poem, and take advantage of any critical materials (such as introductions and footnotes) that might be included.

Secondary works, such as critical analysis, explication, and interpretation: One hallmark of truly great literature is its timelessness. Generation after generation seeks to apply literary lessons to their own cultures, and to learn from what previous generations have offered. Look for essays and articles, monographs (books), and other responses to the works assigned. Use the Kelley Library's databases to search for relevant articles by authors with appropriate credentials. Use the online catalogue to locate books—not only on the text you're using, but on the author, his historical context, and visual resources such as videos and films. Books on the myths of the period, on design conventions in a given era, on manuscript illumination and design, as well as websites on all of the above can be extremely helpful.

Databases offer students the ability to access secondary works such as peer-reviewed articles and/or general-interest periodical articles on topics such as the text or author of a passage, the process and/or history of illumination, etc. Abstracts of articles can give you an idea of what a potential source contains, but you must access the article itself in order to use it as a source for your solution.

Many **periodicals**, including popular magazines, feature articles on topics related to manuscript illumination, typography, the history of design, calligraphy, book arts, and other subjects. Design industry magazines such as *HOW*, *Archiv*, *Communication Arts*, *Selvedge* (a fiber arts journal), and *Letter Arts* may contain articles that could prove useful. Browse the periodical shelves of the Library for possibilities.

Use the Web wisely. Unless I have already linked a site on my pages, you must support your use of web sources by completing a **Website Evaluation** form (linked on the resources page). Criteria to help you choose your internet sources well are included on the form. Using them will help you choose appropriate sites to support your design solutions. To save you time, I have linked several useful sites for each of the available texts, and some of these offer links to further sources (although these may require evaluations). If you're uncertain as to whether you need to evaluate a site, consult me. I have gone to considerable effort to locate substantial, informative, and well-designed source material on the **Final Problem Resources** page. Start web searches there.

A word about encyclopedias and dictionaries. Not all encyclopedic works are appropriate for this assignment. Articles, even in specialized encyclopedias like *The Grove Dictionary of Art*, are good places to look if you know absolutely nothing about a subject—but they’re inappropriate for the kind of research this problem requires. Citations from Webster’s dictionaries are not acceptable, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* can be of immeasurable help, especially with Shakespeare, because it contains historical articles on word usage.

In general, encyclopedias (including *Wikipedia* and *Britannica*) provide basic information on topics with which you are not particularly familiar. They can also lead you to further, more appropriate sources (usually from where they obtain their information). Remember that you may certainly use them as a starting points, but they do not count as acceptable sources. Textbooks fall within the realm of encyclopedias because they offer broad topics and general information. Books like the Meggs *History of Graphic Design* and Gardner’s *Art Through the Ages* can be useful initial sources, but you must go beyond their basic coverage of a period or topic. You may, however, cite them as sources for image inspirations, or in addition to the basic five required items. Indicate in your annotation how you used them.

A Basic Plan of Attack

- Familiarize yourself with the guidelines, and follow my advice about choosing a text. After you have done so, begin to conduct research on the text itself, its author, and its historical context. (For advice on how to do this, see the section in this packet on **Background Research**. Get a general picture of who wrote it and when, and what was going on at the time.
- Spend some time looking at art work from the period in which the text was written (and/or, in the case of Homer, when the action took place). Look for recurring motifs, general design concepts, writing systems, architecture—even indigenous animals and plants.
- Although you should already be familiar with the general historical context of the work, remember that this assignment allows you to produce an entirely modern illumination. Use what you know about symbol manipulation and modern design technologies, typography, and basic design strategies to produce a manuscript for your own time.
- As you proceed, remember that you must account for your decisions, so make notes to yourself about why you are choosing particular images, type, paper, and why you have chosen a particular format. Remember to tell me why you chose the passage in the first place.
- Since you are required to annotate your bibliography, be sure to take notes on each source you plan to include. I will want to know something about the book (the author’s credentials) when possible, but you should be able to summarize the source’s value to your research in three or more (complete) sentences

Please consult me whenever you need advice or do not understand some aspect of the assignment. Part of your grade depends on absolute fidelity to the guidelines, so please ask me for help when you need it. Even if your solution isn’t ready week 9, bring in what you have so I can help you make sure you’re on the right track.

Good luck!