

SOME TIPS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR RESEARCH TRIP

By The Committee for Graduate Students

Preparation:

- Determine archive opening hours and closures in advance. In some places, hours of operation are erratic and summer means long holidays. Arrange your trip and schedule to maximize your ability to utilize the archives.
- When it comes to financing your trip, one large research grant is not always an option, especially for U.S. historians. Cobbling together smaller funds from various sources helps. Try your department, the libraries and institutions to which you are traveling, H-Net, the AHA, and even local history societies for regional research funds. Be sure to check for deadlines well in advance of your trip!
- Arrange for lodging in advance of your travel. Try to stay in close proximity to the archives so that you can make the most of each day. Housing leads can often be found on the web, through professors and students in your program who have conducted research in that locale, through university departments in the place you will be working, or through the office at archives/libraries. If you are will be in a remote place, you might want to check the cultural attaché at the American embassy for leads.
- Get your finances and documents organized. Be sure to bring your passport, copies of award letters if you have funding, letters of introduction from your advisor or home institution and a visa, if necessary. Also bring extra copies of passport photos to serve as archive ID photos or as photos for monthly transportation passes. Consider purchasing a one year membership at the archive (even if your stay is shorter) for the often substantial discounts on photocopies.
- Contact archivists in advance of your trip (by phone or email). In some places, finding aids are incomplete or nonexistent. Describe your project and the archivist may be able to pull some materials for you in advance.
- Find out in advance the usage guidelines at each of the archives you will be working: e.g. limits on boxes that can be consulted each day, use of digital cameras, photocopying policies, etc.
- Talk to colleagues who have conducted research at the archives you will be visiting. They can share their experiences and offer advice.
- Identify topic areas to research and use archive guides at your university library to find call numbers for those items in advance of your trip. It is much easier to arrive at an archive already knowing the call numbers or box numbers.
- Hone your language skills and paleography.

At the archives:

- On your first day at the archive request material that you know they possess and that you need; obtaining something useful right away will provide a confidence boost.
- Be specific about your requests (names, dates, events) and flexible about what the archivist gives you. If you are asking for sensitive material, the archivist may be hesitant to provide you with it until he/she gets to know you.
- Cultivate cordial relations with all archive staff. You may never know who will be in a position to help you in some crucial way. Always try to communicate first in the local language.
- Once you are comfortable in the archive, ask the archivist questions. Also start conversations with other researchers at the archive coffee bar. There is usually someone who uses the archive regularly who can help you.
- Large state and national archives have specialists who catalog things. Ask about what isn't catalogued.

- Copy everything you can so that you can analyze when you get home. Researchers tend to be too tired and stressed to have “eureka moments” in the archives. Retyping documents that are one page or less makes sense. Photocopy longer documents to save you time. Photocopying may be expensive, but the cost of another trip will be even more expensive.
- Create a note taking, labeling and file system that works for you. Use the same system consistently.
- Take notes in the original language. Never transcribe on the spot.
- Back up your material daily.
- Sift through your material at the end of the day. It will be easier to organize when it is fresh in your mind. It is also easier to spot gaps in your research and fill them before you get home.
- Do not use digital cameras on faded documents and/or on documents that are bled through; documents in poor shape do not reproduce well.
- If you find that you are struggling with working in a foreign language, consider hiring a tutor to help you decipher the documents and develop useful phrases for communicating with local scholars and archivists.

Archival Research Methods:

- Every archive has a structure. Stand back and try to make sense of the organizational structure of the archive. Ask yourself “How does the system work? Where might I find what I’m seeking?” Understanding how the archive is structured can help you figure out where to find items you are seeking.
- Have a triage strategy each day at the archive, e.g. order two documents you’ll definitely need and a few documents that you think might be useful.
- Prioritize. Focus your energies on finding the materials that matter most to your argument.
- Look for things that are interesting and unexpected; the important findings emerge from such material. That said, it is also important to develop a sense of what you *don’t* need. Gathering too much material can be overwhelming
- Be aware of material that is grouped in a file that doesn’t fit the category; sometimes items are misclassified.
- Mix tunnel and fishing methods.
 - Tunnel method: find a run of documents and use a start and end date and go from beginning to the end. This is a safe albeit tedious approach.
 - Fishing method: Looking for the missing piece that fits your hypothesis. You may or may not find it but the eureka moments occur using this method.
- Remember that everything isn’t in the archive. Get creative! Try the phone book and family archives, local societies or groups, museums, newspaper repositories, and national libraries.
- Step outside the archives and look around the city, village, or neighborhood that you are studying! You can learn much about the history and culture of a locale by seeing the sites and interacting with locals.
- Persevere. It might take some time to find what you need.

Conducting Oral Interviews:

- Before you start, review the Oral History Association’s Website <http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/> and the IRB article from Perspectives March 2007 <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/issues/2007/0703/>
- Find out how the IRB process works at your home university and complete that process

- Think carefully about your presence and interaction with your interviewee. You are as much a part of the interview as your informant.
- Spend time talking about the subject with the interviewee before the interview in order to build trust and comfort.
- Think about the way in which you document the interview and how this will impact the information you receive. Will you be video recording, audio recording, or taking notes?
- Reflect on the kinds of questions you wish to ask and what kinds of answers they could elicit. You might benefit from asking very specific questions instead of general ones that elicit a broad, abstract, or normative response. Don't pitch the question to draw the response you are looking for. Frame your questions so that you leave room for the respondent's authentic self-expression.
- Consider providing your subjects with a small gift/memento—not a bribe—as an expression of gratitude or acknowledgment. Your informants, even if anonymous in your dissertation, are contributing to your career.

Acknowledgement: The CGS would like to thank Northwestern University History Professors John Bushnell, Peter Hayes, Ed Muir, Dylan Penningroth, and Carl Petry who provided some of the suggestions reproduced here in a workshop for Northwestern history graduate students on "Planning a Research Trip" in April 2006.