

## PLANNING THE RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

When undertaking a research project, whether in legal studies or other subject areas, the most important time spent is in thinking and planning the research topic and then scheduling your time accordingly.

If you have to select your own topic and are having difficulty in deciding what interests you, go through back copies of newspapers and magazines or the vertical file in the school library. These are good places to start for inspiration.

When you have decided that your topic fits into the parameters of the course, be very clear in your own mind which particular aspects of the topic you will be investigating and teasing out. This is the beginning of the most important realisation in your research project: that it is a process of making decisions. This process involves deciding what is going to be excluded as much as what is to be included in the assignment.

### Confining the scope

Only when you are clear in your own mind about what you want to include and exclude — the scope of your project — can you maximise the level of help from teachers, school and public librarians and resource contacts.

Presenting a beautifully typed letter to a legal institution requesting 'any information you've got on the topic of crime in Australia' is simply not on. The time you have saved yourself in not thinking about the scope of your topic is time that is lost in either getting the resource contact to do your thinking for you, or, what is more likely, putting your request to the bottom of their in-tray, perhaps never to be seen again.

Another important part of the thinking stage is to be clear early on about the purpose of the project. In one sense, it is obvious that the purpose is to please the teacher, get a pass at the very least and go on to the next obstacle in your schooling. In another,

stricter sense, the purpose of any piece of writing determines what gets written and in what way. An essay which has as its purpose to persuade its reader to a particular viewpoint is different in its form and style from a report which requires that it be 'objective' and contain an 'introduction' and 'findings'. Being clear about the purpose of the written product influences how you undertake your research; the avenues you pursue for instance.

If you spend this preliminary thinking stage of the process productively, the project should not appear as a dark void, but rather as a fairly clear picture of the topic itself and how it will be investigated. It is best not to consider going too far afield in seeking information until this picture is formed and you can predict the likely questions you will be asked by those from whom you intend to seek help.

It is most worthwhile, in fact essential, that from this stage onward, you keep a brief log of the steps you've plodded in the research process: dates of phone calls, copies of letters sent; notes from conversations; sourcing of articles. This is especially important if the research is undertaken over a term or more as memory is notoriously unreliable. It is also important as a means of verifying that the end product is yours and not your older sister's.

### Seeking information

The first principle in seeking information is initially exhausting all sources of information closest to home before radiating outwards. Related to this, you need to anticipate the likely time delay in receiving a response from an information source with which you have had no direct contact. Consider these sources of information 'long shots', and while allowing plenty of time in your schedule to act upon the information you may receive, don't rely exclusively on it.

The second principle of investigation is not to assume that other people

will be as willing to act on the urgency of your need for their time and assistance as you would like them to be. Always approach contacts whether through a letter, by phone or face to face with an approach that demonstrates an understanding of the burden the request may be placing on their time. This is likely to win for you more of their time and sooner.

A third principle in seeking information is in phrasing the request in a way that demonstrates the clarity of the scope of your investigation but also the flexibility of considering other possible aspects.

Finally, always be critical in evaluating the worth of the information you have received at the time of receiving it, not when you're about to start writing the product of your research efforts. A checklist of questions or criteria assessing the quality of information should include some of the following:

- is the information as up to date as possible?
- is the information credible?
- has the information been documented elsewhere?
- does the information conflict in any way?
- does the information raise more questions than it provides answers to?
- is the information relevant to your assignment?

Most of this advice in undertaking research is referring to secondary sources — that is, information that has already been gathered and interpreted by someone else. You may wish to complement this type of information by generating your own through primary sources, such as interviewing a subject or conducting a survey for instance. While this is the most common method of information gathering by students, it is often poorly undertaken in the rush to get out of the classroom and ask people hastily for-

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mulated questions. To avoid some of the pitfalls of this type of research, consult references such as those listed below.

Here is a list of sources of information you may wish to consider reading, listening to, watching or contacting. When writing to the organisations, include a stamped, self-addressed envelope for a speedier response. The addresses can be found in the White Pages.

## Magazines/Journals

- *Aboriginal Law Bulletin*
- *Alternative Law Journal* (formerly *Legal Service Bulletin*)
- *Australian Current Law Bulletin*
- *Choice*
- *The Law Institute Journal*
- *Law Bulletin*
- *Legaldade*
- *Modern Times* (formerly *Australian Society*)

## Radio

- *The Law Report*
- *The Parliament Program*
- ABC Radio National programs broadcast week. Tapes of programs are available from ABC Radio Tapes, P.O. Box 9994, Sydney, 2001.

## Films

- Witness for the Prosecution
- The Verdict
- Twelve Angry Men
- And Justice for All
- The Bedroom Window
- Cathy's Child
- Kramer vs Kramer
- Evil Angels
- Lord of the Flies
- Footloose (Changing the Law)
- How the West was Lost
- Beyond Reasonable Doubt (New Zealand title)
- The Burning Bed
- Custody
- The Wave

- Mr Neal is Entitled to be an Agitator

## Videos/television programs

- The Driver
- The Bandit
- Do I Have to Kill my Child?
- A Pig in a Poke
- A Couple of Charlies
- How Laws are Made
- Going to Court
- Battles with no Winners
- Doing Time
- Changing the Law
- Do Not Pass Go
- How Fair is the Jury?
- Rape and Marriage — the Scottsborough Boys

## Organisations

- Legal Aid Commission
- Law Reform Commission (Federal and States)
- Ombudsmen (Federal and States)
- Law Council of Australia
- Law Institute
- Industrial Relations Commission
- Family Court
- Tenants' Union
- Commonwealth Employment Service
- Citizens' Advice Bureaux
- Driver Education Centre of Australia
- Attorney-General's Department
- Australian Bureau of Statistics
- Tenancy Information Network
- Council for Civil Liberties
- Parliamentary Education Office
- Equal Opportunity Board
- Australian Council of Trade Unions
- Australian Institute of Criminology
- Australian Institute of Family Studies

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(Thank you to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board for assistance in compiling resource listing.)

## COMMONWEALTH OMBUDSMAN — ANNUAL REPORT FOR SCHOOLS

The Commonwealth Ombudsman has prepared a special version of his annual report for use in schools. It contains case studies, statistics of complaints received, and discussions of the operations of the Commonwealth Ombudsman, including the Federal Police Complaints function and the Defence Force.

Copies have already been despatched to teachers and curriculum departments in some states, but teachers of legal or civics courses who would like a copy and have not yet received one can obtain one free of charge by contacting —

Ms L Gordon  
Office of the Commonwealth  
Ombudsman  
GPO Box 442  
Canberra ACT 2601  
tel. (06) 276 0145  
fax (06) 249 7829

The schools report is in A4 format, and comprises an introduction and the full text of the annual report 1990-91, but without financial or staffing information which is unlikely to be of any relevance or interest to school students. Single copies only will be provided, but teachers are welcome to photocopy or otherwise reproduce the material. Copies of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's (formal) Annual Report are supposed to be available through Australian Government Publishing Service bookstores at a cost of \$12.95.