

How to Manage and Organize Sources *as you write a proposal*

STEP ONE: SKIMMING AND SORTING

The most dangerous way to approach this task, I'd argue, would be to sit down with a bunch of books and articles and start reading. Even if these books and articles are fantastic and you know they're crucial for your project—just hold on! This isn't step one! Instead, commit yourself to very productive SKIMMING, and focus on SORTING the materials into the following categories:

PILE ONE: **This is useful BACKGROUND info that helps me understand my research subject or topic.** It's common knowledge material that I won't necessarily need to cite but that I need in order to move on with the proposal project. This stuff is most immediate and will help inform my research questions, design, etc. It might include books, articles, Internet websites, blogs, Wikipedia entries, encyclopedia entries, magazine articles, popular culture materials (like YouTube videos, perhaps), or word - of - mouth details that you learn just from being "in" the culture. You may already be an expert of sorts on your subject/topic, and so you might not need to hunt for a ton of this info. If you haven't found a lot of background info and you're feeling uncertain, this is the time to think about abandoning the project and considering a new direction!

PILE TWO: **This is useful CONTEXTUAL information that helps me situate my research subject or topic.** I've already found a fair amount of background info and can speak relatively fluently about my topic/subject, and so now I need sources to locate this topic/subject HISTORICALLY and SOCIALLY. I want to show that my research subject/topic is rooted in a particular location at a particular moment. This sort of material might include things like the CIA World FactBook, encyclopedia entries, newspaper articles, or websites. Most importantly, though, this category should also include articles or books written by all sorts of academics (historians, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, economists, etc.) who are discussing the social or historical context in any way.

PILE THREE: **This is useful THEORETICAL literature that relates, in some way, to my proposed study.** It's not necessarily on the same topic/theme, located the same place, or from the same historical context. But it helps me to THINK about the BROADER ANTHROPOLOGICAL debates that are at stake in my study. It helps

me to articulate how I will contribute to broader anthropological conversations about these topics. It might make sense to start with pieces like those in the Annual Review of Anthro to get a feel for the shape of the field. Or it might be useful to skim the introductions of a few key books, which often outline the scope of the field and the key scholars working within it. These sources might lead me to other. Read the introductions to books rather than the whole book to get a feel for the book's argument, or search for scholarly reviews of books in anthropological (or other) journals. For the purpose of a Wenner - Gren proposal, this pile of literature should contain mostly anthropological books and articles but might also contain some works written by historians, sociologists, political scientists, economists, etc, who are likewise taking part in anthropological debates.

PILE FOUR: **This is not useful information.** It doesn't really add to my background info about my subject of study. It doesn't help me to contextualize this subject. And it's not engaging or pertinent as a theoretical piece. Delete the file, recycle the article, or return the book to the library! It's a liberating feeling to set aside a pile of literature that you won't have to engage with at all!

STEP TWO: READING FOR PATTERNS

After and only after you've engaged in the kind of sorting exercise described above, you'll next want to quickly read through the pieces you've sorted. You're looking for patterns as you read.

Piles One and Two: Notice patterns within "background info" (pile one) and "context" (pile two). You're looking for patterns in content: in details about the research subject, the historical context, or the social context. These patterns will help you distinguish what is "common knowledge" and doesn't really need to be cited. If many people are saying the same thing, and they're not saying it with citations, then it's likely common knowledge. Historical and social "facts" (land area size, dates of independence, historical decisions, etc.) don't typically need to be cited. It will also help you to understand how to situate the phenomenon or object or concept that you're studying. Take notes of the patterns you note—key dates, key figures, key developments, key events, key cultural concerns.

Pile Three: Within your "scholarly/theoretical" pile (pile three), notice patterns not in content (as above) but in ARGUMENT. These people aren't likely working on your exact topic or theme. They may be working in different contexts or might be looking at a phenomenon from a very different historical vantage point. They might share your interest in topic, but their circumstances are quite

different. You're looking for what they're arguing and how it might help YOU take a stance. A proposal must ALWAYS demonstrate that the author is familiar with current research and that she's engaging with what these authors are saying. Set aside particularly crucial books or articles that are really going to help you as you shape the theoretical commitment of the proposal. Take notes on the patterns you note—key arguments, key vocabulary or terms that seem to occupy writers, key disagreements, key camps of scholars (those that seem to agree with each other).

STEP THREE: CAREFUL READING OF KEY SCHOLARLY TEXTS

You should have set aside more consequential texts from pile three. Now, finally, is the time you can read these very select texts more carefully. For the purpose of a proposal, you still don't need to read in depth! But be sure that you have a fairly good grasp of the author's theoretical contribution and how the text fits alongside other texts talking about the same issue or topic. Take notes—why are these particular texts so important to anthropology's understanding of the topic at hand? What do these authors contribute? Where do you position your own emergent study?