

# iii – A Guide to Effective Background Reading

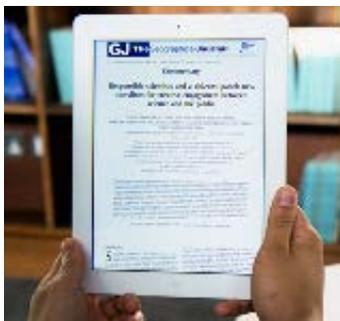
Researchers use background reading from the very start of their investigative process. It can inform their ideas, lead their thinking in a certain direction and tell them where a gap in the body of knowledge lies; a gap that hopefully the researcher will be able to fill through their own enquiry.

For your Independent Investigation, background reading is also important. As well as gaining you access to the higher grade levels, it will also make the write-up and planning of your investigation a lot easier.

## What to read

Generally your reading will be focussed around four sources of information. Good research looks to use a variety of these sources so try not to get too caught up with, for example, only using the internet as a supply of information. It is worth noting that not everything you read will automatically find its way into your final Independent Investigation write-up – you are likely to read about a third more than you actually quote from. However, none of your reading should be viewed as a waste of time: even if you do not end up using a particular idea in your write-up, it will have informed your thinking or steered you away from the wrong direction.

**Books** are a good starting point for background reading. They will often give a broad overview of a topic and give you an idea of which areas of your investigation to look into next. Avoid using just your school textbook at any stage of your background reading – it not only shows a lack of real research endeavour, but as a text it is unlikely to be designed for the depth needed for your Independent Investigation. Instead, it is a good idea to ask your teacher for good books on a topic, or your school librarian. Most local libraries can also order books for you if there is something specific you are looking for.



**Journals** are academic magazines that contain a collection of recently written research from researchers working in universities. They will contain highly specific details about a certain topic, often quoting real life examples from around the world. Reading and understanding the whole of a journal article may seem a little daunting at first so it is a good idea to start by reading the abstract and seeing if it covers the particular idea you are looking for.

Some geographical journals are available online for open download, while others are hosted through special servers. Your school librarian may also be able to provide advice about any subscriptions to journals that the school holds.

The ease with which you can use an internet search engine to find information makes **websites** common sources of information. However, this ease comes with a catch and the internet can be notorious for being a source of wrong and misleading 'facts'. It is important to consider authorship: while books and journal articles have to be reviewed many times before they can be published, the internet is an open forum on which anyone can write their



opinion. If used with caution, and by using websites from well-known organisations, the internet can open up a wealth of information which you may otherwise not have access to.



**Newspapers** can provide easy access to relevant and up-to-date information on a range of contemporary geographical topics. However, like the internet, they should be used with caution. Most newspapers subscribe to a particular political viewpoint and so may only present one side of a particular argument. Newspaper editors may over-sensationalise an individual story as they know it may sell more copies, ignoring or underplaying some of the more contextual, but less entertaining, facts about the piece. Local newspapers may be a good starting point for finding out about issues that are affecting your local area.

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## How to read

Before you start reading anything make sure you are ready to record the information you find. Then note the following information:

- Who wrote the article
- The year of writing
- The name of the book / journal / newspaper / website etc.
- The name of the article under which the information appears
- Who published the article and the place of publication
- The page numbers where the article appears
- Other specific information such as a web address

You may wish to visually scan the article first for key words and ideas and then go through in more detail noting the main points. Aim not to write down everything the author is saying, but instead only what is relevant or of interest to your study – in the case of a journal article, this may only be two or three sentences summarising the main points. Remember to note the specific page numbers of any diagrams that you may wish to reproduce or refer back to.

It is tempting to photocopy large sections of books or print out journal articles without actually reading them and in doing so create your own library which you will read once it is compiled. Excessive photocopying can be a distraction from the process of actually reading the information and can end up being a waste of time. It may be far better to read articles as you find them – each article you read will direct your thinking in a certain direction and thus reduce the chance of reading the same thing many times from many sources.

Many researchers have also fallen into the trap of using their background reading as a distraction from the harder task of actually carrying out the research itself. Try to gain a sense of when to stop reading and remember the marker of your Independent Investigation does not necessarily need to know absolutely everything in the history of your chosen topic.