Research Tip:

I have always considered research and teaching to be mutually reinforcing endeavors. Research can build upon the interest and enthusiasm that initially led us to choose our academic disciplines and subsequently to teach in them. Our research can help us to update and rejuvenate our course materials, to design new courses and to contribute to curriculum decisions. Our students and colleagues can take pride in our professional accomplishments. Our published work can bring us visibility within our fields and help with our professional advancement in areas such as promotion, tenure, grants, further publications, and invitations for professional service and public lectures.

The bottom line for good research is what it has always been—define your topic, your approaches to it, and your goals clearly; learn as much as you can; and write about your discoveries and conclusions lucidly. That having been said, these tips may be of help.

My experience has been in literary and film studies. In recent years, however, cultural studies, which encourages cross-disciplinary research, has had a growing and healthy influence on numerous disciplines and some of my experiences may have application beyond my field.

SELECTING A TOPIC

When you are selecting a topic for a substantial project (such as a dissertation or a book-length study), one that will involve considerable time and work, I strongly advise choosing one that will stimulate you, one upon which you will enjoy working. Don't choose a topic simply because you think it will sell. If you do so, your interest is almost guaranteed to flag early on and your diminished enthusiasm will show in the finished product. Serious research involves untold hours of exploration, much of it exhausting. If you're delving into stimulating material, however, the research can not only be rewarding on its own terms but it will also expand your grasp of your topic while leading you to unexpected connections with other useful material.

Because research can be lonely work, you might consider coauthoring some of your projects. After searching diligently for weeks for some connection and suddenly making a breakthrough, you can feel jubilant but, sadly, no one can really understand how that feels, even when they are sympathetic. They'll say it's "good" or "nice," but they haven't traveled the road you've traveled. I've written books by myself and I've also coauthored books. The value of co-authorship is that, when you make a breakthrough, you can share it with someone who understands on a gut level what it means; that in itself can be rewarding. It also gives you a partner who can both share the research burden

and bring different theoretical approaches to the material. If you coauthor, however, choose someone you trust and with whom you get along. I have had wonderful experiences with coauthors but have heard of many bad ones, largely due to interpersonal problems.

When I was working on my doctoral dissertation in Victorian Literature at NYU, I learned a valuable lesson from my advisor, William E. Buckler. Like most graduate students in my field, I presumed that the selection of a dissertation topic meant ferreting out something that no one else had touched, such as an obscure work by a minor poet. When I mentioned some possibilities to Buckler, he shocked me by advising me not to waste my time on minor material in which I had little genuine interest; he went on to say, "Why don't you work on Tennyson, or Dickens, or Browning?" Intimidated at the prospect, I said that they were giants in the field and had already been studied by others. His response was that, of course they had been dealt with by others, but not by me, and that I should have the confidence to feel that I could bring new perspectives to their work. Eventually, with his support, I wrote about an impossibly ambitious topic, Victorian Novels on Film. Where earlier I had feared the tedium of drudge work on minor figures in whom I had little interest, I now found it exhilarating to tackle such a grand topic. It forced me to open up vast new areas of theory and criticism for myself and led to the publication of my first book, before I had even completed my degree. Buckler's insight was and is a life-saving one. Don't be afraid to attempt ambitious work if it involves material you'll derive pleasure from exploring. That pleasure can fuel the research and lead to other projects.

This is not to say that every project on which you work must be fascinating. At times, for various reasons, you will probably take on work that can be helpful to you but that simply isn't your cup of tea. Do it and do it well but don't get mired in it.

Once you've selected a topic, spend a good deal of time refining it. Careful preparation will save a lot of needless travel down fruitless pathways. This doesn't mean that, once you are in the middle of your research, you can't find an exciting new path that will lead you to redefine everything.

While you are refining your topic, solicit all the help you can. Speak with people in your field. People in other fields can also lend valuable assistance with structure and organization. Discuss your ideas and plans with people you respect. Some will help; some won't, but exploring multiple alternatives at the earliest stages can prevent wasted work down the line.

THE RESEARCH
My main suggestion here is to diversify your research sources. The standard way to begin is to search the existing literature on the topic, which will give you a sense of what has already been done and of the traditional perspectives upon your subject. This is indispensable but it is only a beginning. It should identify

the major archives. Whenever possible, travel to those archives and spend time with primary documents.

The internet has changed the landscape considerably for researchers. At a recent dinner I had with the cultural historian David S. Reynolds, author of award-winning books like *John Brown, Abolitionist* and *Walt Whitman's America*, he mentioned that his research for the Brown book involved less travel than for the Whitman one because so much material, like the Abraham Lincoln papers, is now available online. This underscores developments that have been spectacularly helpful for researchers (not to mention the value that laptops and other electronic devices can have for note-taking and organizing data). During the past twenty years, the web has given researchers instant access to volumes of materials earlier unimaginable. This fact does not, however, negate the utility of archives. Good archives almost always have related materials one might not have known about and, furthermore, archivists, many of whom know their holdings intimately, can be indispensably helpful. Archives also lead to other archives (Here I am using the term archives very loosely, primarily meaning depositories of materials. They can be traditional university, governmental, or institutionally-based repositories, most commonly of paper documents. They can also be public records, records and collections of individuals and families, of publishers, of corporations, of laboratories, of learned societies, of enthusiasts.). I began my research for my book on Raymond Chandler at the UCLA Special Collections Archive. That led me to resources like the Margaret Herrick Library of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences and, perhaps most importantly, to the professional organization, The Mystery Writers of America (of which Chandler was president shortly before his death). Members of that organization were particularly generous with materials and contacts not covered in standard Chandler bibliographies. Furthermore, when working with biographical material, the very acts of handling primary documents and of speaking with people directly involved with your subject can give you a special pleasure. I felt it when going through Raymond Chandler's private papers at UCLA and also in interviewing Helga Green (who had been Chandler's literary agent and who had also been engaged to him) in London. Although she generously granted me permission to cite his work, my main pleasure from the meeting came simply from talking with someone who had known Chandler well. This sort of personal contact may or may not directly contribute to your work but it is likely that you will cherish its memory long after you've completed your book.

Beyond traditional archives, there can be great value in going to places where things occurred, in interviewing people who might have been involved or who have friends or relatives involved, and in gaining an understanding of the process. I have written extensively on the work of Blake Edwards and it has been particularly helpful to visit the sets of his films while he was shooting them and to visit the theaters in which he was rehearsing plays he had written and was directing. It has also been productive to interview him and people who have worked with him in order to learn about the process and practical considerations

of his creative work. Edwards is a living subject, which presents different considerations from biographical research on a relatively recently (1959) deceased one like Chandler, or a long deceased one like Shakespeare. If I were writing on Shakespeare, I would want to learn abut the practices of the Elizabethan theater and also to watch current plays in rehearsal. Many things have changed in theater in the past four hundred years but some have not. Visiting the reconstructed Globe Theater in London last year gave me insights into Shakespeare's work that have been useful for my literature courses.

WRITING AND PUBLICATION
Writing and research often blend. Once your project is underway, it is worthwhile to use parts of it for conference papers and public presentations. This helps you refine your ideas and methods and can also provide valuable feedback from peers. I have always found that a large project yields numerous smaller ones along the way, such as conference papers, articles, public presentations, panel discussions, radio and television and newspaper interviews. These can publicize your association with your topic and help you to streamline your work.

Contact with people involved in your field can be profoundly beneficial and is available in numerous venues. I co-chair the Columbia University Seminar on Cinema and Interdisciplinary Interpretation, a faculty-level seminar that meets monthly during the academic year. We bring in visible people in the field to talk about their works-in-progress. These meetings enable the members to keep abreast of developments in the field and also provide the speakers with feedback on their work. Columbia sponsors roughly seventy-five such seminars in disciplines as diverse as physics and theology. I also belong to the Biography Seminar at NYU, a group of professional biographers that works in a similar way. Comparable groups are probably available to you. If you cannot locate such a university-linked group, the NYC area has numerous public events suited to different fields, events at which you might meet people in your area. They occur at places like the NY Public Library, the 92nd Street "Y," the Museum of Modern Art, and various cultural institutions.

Another avenue, with which I am not particularly familiar, is that of chat rooms and other web-based resources. Many people find them extremely valuable.

Participate in professional conferences in your field. They provide venues in which you can share your work and sample that of others. They are also important for publication contacts. Book and journal editors regularly attend them, not only to promote their own books and journals but also to attend the presentations in search of likely prospects for book contracts. I often meet my editors at conferences for a catch-up dinner. When I am editing a book of my own and soliciting essays for it, I often approach people whose work I have heard at conferences. If you have a project underway, don't be afraid to approach editors at conferences to pitch your work. They are looking for new talent. You can often find them at their table in the publication room or at book parties.

Before doing this, however, do your research. Ask people in your field who the likeliest publishers for your project are likely to be. It makes no sense to approach a publisher whose list is not geared to your topic.

Furthermore, if you intend to approach a publisher, prepare a proposal. A proposal should be brief (c 10 pages); it should describe your project, describe potentially competitive works and ways in which yours would differ from them, make a case for the likelihood of wide interest in your book, and demonstrate why you are the person to do this work (you might cite your background, previous works, access to materials, and likelihood of completing it in a timely manner).

Do this while your project is underway; don't wait until it is completed. If a publisher is interested, they may have suggestions about shaping your book. If you agree with them, their suggestions can save you time and rewriting.

I don't have much to say about the actual writing beyond advising you to make your manuscript as lucid, substantial, well-shaped, and accessible as possible. Show parts of it (nobody wants to look at a 400 page manuscript) to people you respect for suggestions. Keep your eye on the clock. There comes a time when you need to move beyond the research phase and begin writing. It can be tempting to continue researching forever. Some people enjoy the research process and don't want to leave it; some become paralyzed by the notion that, if they stop, they will miss new material just around the corner; some are terrified of the writing process. Some of these considerations are legitimate; they can also become quagmires.

I hope you find research topics that you can enjoy. There can be pleasure in the research, pleasure in the shaping of it into something that makes a contribution to your field and of which you can be proud, and pleasure in holding the first copy of the published book in your hands. There is also value in moving on. It doesn't always work that way, but it happens often enough to make it worthwhile.