

Historians are like reporters – they ask who, what, why, where, when, and how. These are natural questions for kids to have. They ask them all the time. Libraries and librarians can play a big role in helping students develop their curiosity and showing them how to answer their questions. Libraries, after all, are a vital tool for any researcher.

How do you do research? What sources can you trust? How can you tell if a source is reliable?

A lot of librarians spend time giving students basic digital literacy. What kind of site endings are more trustworthy, those ending in .com or those ending in .edu? Provide a list of resources students can go to. On the top of any list should be the Library of Congress, an incredibly rich repository of broadsheets, newspapers, photos, newsreels, and, of course, books. Use this site to show how information comes in many different forms. Things that may seem unimportant, like advertisements and posters (broadsheets), can reveal cultural information and provide a vivid picture of daily life. Oral histories and interviews give personal voices to a period and show how we're all part of history, that everyone has a story to tell.

Demonstrate how to search through collections, what kinds of search terms to use to get the answers they need. Detailed questions can be more fruitful, but too detailed can bypass useful information. Show how sometimes researchers find the best items precisely when they aren't looking for them, the magic of the serendipitous discovery. It's the unexpected detail that can shift one's understanding of an event or situation, casting it in an entirely new light.

Show how personal history is, that it's made up of people, places, things, like the ones they themselves know. History isn't a big abstract list of names and dates, a grid of events. It's the story we tell ourselves and each other about our past and our present. It's the shape we give to the memories of others and ourselves. Start with something accessible, your family history, and see how it fits into a greater context. One good way to start is to explore the story of how your family came to America. We're a country of immigrants and only Native Americans can claim to be from here (which is a rich story in itself to explore, a distinctive kind of research). Everyone else has some research they can do to track how their ancestors came to the United States, where from, and why. After collecting family stories, students can look at other sources for similar histories, putting their personal history into the context of a bigger culture and time period.

Things to consider when doing family research:

Make categories of questions, for example about daily life (school, work, family, fun, technology, religion), as well as broader questions (politics, economics, major news events, trends). Draw connections between the two worlds, show how they interconnect and influence each other.