Finding Sources and Conducting Field Research

Students are surrounded by a wealth of information—in print, online, in videos and podcasts, even face to face! Much of this information is excellent, but some is of dubious quality. This can make finding the information you need to support your ideas exciting, but it also means you will have to develop a research strategy and sift possible sources carefully. What you are writing about, who will read your writing project, and the type of writing you are doing (a story for your college newspaper, a proposal for your employer, or a research project for your U.S. history course) will help you decide which types of sources are most appropriate. Does your writing project require you to depend mainly on secondary sources—like books and articles that analyze and summarize a subject—or develop primary sources, such as interviews with experts, surveys, or observational studies you conduct yourself and laboratory reports, historical documents, diaries, letters, or works of literature written by others? Whatever sources you decide will best help you support your claims, this chapter will help you find or develop the resources you need.

Searching Library Catalogs and Databases

For most college research projects, finding appropriate sources starts with your library's home page, where you can

- find (and sometimes access) books, reference sources (such as general and subject-specific encyclopedias and dictionaries), reports, documents, multimedia resources (such as films and audio recordings), and much more;
- use your library's database to find (and sometimes access) articles in newspapers, magazines, and scholarly journals, as well as in reference sources;
- find research guides, lists of reliable sources on topics frequently studied by students.

Many libraries now offer unified search, which allows patrons to search for books and articles in magazines, newspapers, and scholarly journals simultaneously, from the
home page. If you aren't sure whether you will need to search for books and articles using separate catalogs and databases, consult a librarian.

Your library’s home page is also the place to find information about the brick-and-mortar library—its floor plan, its hours of operation, and the journals it has available in print. You might even be able to find links to what you need in other libraries or get online help from a librarian.

**Use appropriate search terms.**

Just as with a search engine like Google, you can search a library catalog or database by typing your search terms—an author’s name, the title of a work, a subject term or keyword, even a call number—into the search box. To search successfully, put yourself in the position of the people writing about your topic to figure out what words they might have used. If your topic is “ecology,” for example, you may find information under the keywords ecosystem, environment, pollution, and endangered species, as well as a number of other related keywords, depending on the focus of your research and your area of study.

**Broaden or narrow your results.**

When conducting a search, you may get too few hits and have to broaden your topic. To broaden your search, try the following:

- **Replace a specific term with a more general term**  
  Replace sister or brother with sibling

- **Substitute a synonym for one of your keywords**  
  Replace home study with home schooling or student-paced education

- **Combine terms with or to get results with either or both terms**  
  Search home study or home schooling to get results that include both home study and home schooling

- **Add a wildcard character, usually an asterisk (*) or question mark (?)**  
  (Check the search tips to find out which wildcard character is in use.)

  Search home school* or home school? to retrieve results for home school, home schooling, and home schooled

Most often, you’ll get too many hits and need to narrow your search. To narrow a search, try the following:

- **Add a specific term**  
  Search not just home schooling but home schooling statistics

- **Combine search terms into phrases or word strings**  
  Search home schooling and California or “home schooling California”

In many cases, using phrases or word strings will limit your results to items that include all the words you have specified. You may need to insert quotation marks around the terms or insert the word and between them to create a search phrase or word string. Check the search tips for the database, catalog, or search engine you are using.
Find books (and other sources).

Books housed in academic library collections offer two distinct advantages to the student researcher:

1. They provide in-depth coverage of topics.
2. They are likely to be published by reputable presses that strive for accuracy and reliability.

You can generally search for books and other library resources, like reference works and multimedia resources, by author's name, title, keyword, or subject heading, and narrow your search by using advanced search options.

Though you can search by keywords, most college libraries use special subject headings devised by the Library of Congress (the national library of the United States) to catalog books. Finding and using the subject headings most relevant to your search will make your research more productive. You can locate the subject headings your library uses by pulling up the record of a relevant book you have already found and looking for the list of words under the heading “Subject” or “Subject headings” (Figure 21.1). Including these terms in your search may help you find additional relevant resources. Ask a librarian for help if you cannot identify the headings.

**FIGURE 21.1 A Book’s Catalog Record**

An item’s record provides a lot more information than just the author, title, and call number. You can also find the subject headings by which it was cataloged and perhaps also the item’s status (whether it has been checked out) and its location. Some libraries may allow you to place a hold on a book or find similar items. Some libraries, such as the one whose catalog is depicted here, even allow you to capture the book’s record with your smartphone or have the information texted or e-mailed to you.
Some libraries also allow you to search by call number, which makes it easy to find other items on the same or a similar topic. (You might think of a call-number search as the electronic equivalent of looking at books shelved nearby.) For example, typing LC40 (the first part of the call number from the library record shown in Figure 21.1) into the search box calls up the records of other items on the subject of home schooling:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Call number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love in a Time of Homeschooling: A Mother and Daughter's Uncommon Year</td>
<td>LC40.B76 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeschool: An American History</td>
<td>LC40.G34 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Schooling: Parents as Educators</td>
<td>LC40.H65 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Children Learn at Home</td>
<td>LC40.T48 2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If your search for books in your college library turns up little that is useful to you, do not give up. You may be able to request an item from another library via your library's interlibrary loan service. Inquire at your library for services available to you that can connect you to resources in other libraries.

Many libraries also house archives and special collections comprising manuscripts, rare books, and specialized materials or resources of local or worldwide interest. Whereas some libraries may list these items in their online catalog, others may provide links to these special collections in a different location on their Web sites; still others may provide access only through a catalog in the archives or special-collections room. Ask a librarian whether such materials may be useful to you.

Find articles in periodicals.

Much of the information you will use to write your research project will come from articles in periodicals, publications such as newspapers, magazines, or scholarly journals that are published at regular intervals. To locate relevant articles on your topic, start your search with one of your library's databases. Why not just start with a Google search? There are two very good reasons:

1. Google will pull up articles from any publication it indexes, from personal Web sites to scholarly journals. Results rise to the top of the list based on a number of factors but not necessarily the reliability of the source. A Google search will turn up helpful sources, but you will need to spend a good deal of time sifting through the numerous hits you get to find sources that are both relevant and reliable. (Google Scholar may help you locate more reliable sources than those you might find through a typical Google search.)
2. Sources you find through *Google* may ask you to pay for access to articles, or they may require a subscription. Your library may already subscribe to these sources on your behalf. Also, adding databases to your search strategy will diversify your search and provide you with access to resources not available through a search engine such as *Google*.

Most college libraries subscribe at least to **general databases** and **subject-specific databases** as well as databases that index newspapers. General databases (such as *Academic OneFile, Academic Search Premier or Elite or Complete,*¹ and *ProQuest Central*) index articles from both scholarly journals and popular magazines. Subject-specific databases (such as *ERIC—Education Resources Information Center, MLA International Bibliography, PsycINFO, and General Science Full Text*) index articles only in their discipline. Newspaper databases (such as *Alt-Press Watch, LexisNexis Academic, National Newspaper Index,* and *ProQuest Newspapers*) index newspaper articles. For college-level research projects, you may use all three types of databases to find appropriate articles. (Note that many libraries also offer ways to search multiple databases at once.) For the research project on home schooling that appears in Chapter 24, “Citing and Documenting Sources in MLA Style,” Cristina Dinh might have consulted both a general database and a subject-specific database like *ERIC*.

If your database search returns too many unhelpful results, use the search strategies for choosing keywords and narrowing results discussed earlier in this chapter (p. 610) or use the database’s advanced search options to refine your search. Many databases allow users to restrict results to articles published in academic journals, for example, or to articles that were published only after a certain date (see Figure 21.2, p. 610). Use the Help option or ask a librarian for assistance.

Increasingly, databases provide access to full-text articles, either in HTML or PDF format. When you have the option, choose the PDF format, as this will provide you with photographs, graphs, and charts in context, and you will be able to include the page numbers in your citation. If you find a citation to an article that is not accessible through a database, however, do not ignore it. Check with a librarian to find out how you can get a copy of the article.

**Find government documents and statistical information.**

Federal, state, and local governments make many of their documents available directly through the Web. For example, you can access statistical data about the United States through the U.S. Census Bureau’s Web site (census.gov), and you can learn a great deal about other countries through the Web sites of the U.S. State Department (travel.state.gov) and the CIA (cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook).

The Library of Congress provides a useful portal for finding government documents (federal, state, local, and international) through its Web site (loc.gov), and the U.S. Government Printing Office provides free electronic access to documents produced by the federal government through its FDsys Web page (gpo.gov/fdsys).

¹ The names of databases change over time and vary from library to library, so ask your instructor or a reference librarian if you need help.
FIGURE 21.2 Database Search Results
Database search results may allow you to access an article directly or provide the information you need to locate (and cite) it, including the title, the author(s), and the article’s publication information. The database may also provide options for narrowing a search by publication date, source type (academic journal versus newspaper, for example), and so on.

Some libraries have collections of government publications and provide access to government documents through databases or catalogs. Your library may also offer statistical resources and data sets. See if your library has a guide to these resources, or ask a librarian for advice. You can also find government documents online using an advanced Google search (google.com/advanced_search) and specifying .gov as the type of site, or domain, you want to search (see Figure 21.3).

Find Web sites and interactive sources.
By now, you are likely quite familiar with searching the Web. This section introduces you to some tools and strategies to use it more efficiently. But first, a few cautions:

- Your research project will be only as credible as the sources you use. Because search engines index Web sources without evaluating them, not all the results a search engine like Google generates will be reliable and relevant to your purposes.
Web sources may not be stable. A Web site that existed last week may no longer be available today, or its content may have changed. Be sure to record the information you need to cite a source when you first find it.

Web sources must be documented. No matter what your source—a library book, a scholarly article, or a Web site or Web page—you will need to cite and document your source in your list of works cited or references. If you are publishing your report online, check also to determine whether you will need permission to reproduce an image or any other elements.

Google Scholar and Google Book Search
Although you may use search engines like Google with great rapidity and out of habit, as a college researcher you are likely to find it worthwhile to familiarize yourself with other parts of the Google search site. Of particular interest to the academic writer are Google Scholar and Google Book Search. Google Scholar retrieves articles from a number of scholarly databases and a wide range of general-interest and scholarly books. Google Book Search searches both popular and scholarly books. Both Google Scholar and Google Book Search offer overviews and, in some cases, the full text of a source.

Note: Whatever search engine you use, always click on the link called Help, Hints, or Tips on the search tool's home page to find out more about the commands and advanced-search techniques it offers. Most search engines allow searches using the techniques discussed earlier in the chapter (p. 610). Many also provide advanced searching options that allow you to limit results to those created between specific dates, in specific languages, and so on.

Other Useful Search Options
No matter how precisely you search the Web with a standard search engine, you may not hit on the best available resources. Starting your search from a subject guide, such as those provided by the Internet Public Library (ipl.org/div/special) or the librarians at your school can direct you to relevant and reliable sources of online information.

Interactive Sources
Interactive sources, including blogs, wikis, RSS feeds, social networking sites (like Facebook and Twitter), and discussion lists, can also be useful sources of
information, especially if your research project focuses on a current event or late-breaking news.

- **Blogs** are Web sites that are updated regularly, often many times a day. They are usually organized chronologically, with the newest posts at the top, and may contain links or news stories, but generally focus on the opinions of the blog host and visitors. Blogs by experts in the field are likely to be more informative than blogs by amateurs or fans.

- **Wikis**—of which *Wikipedia* is the best known example—offer content contributed and modified collaboratively by a community of users. Wikis can be very useful for gleaning background information, but because (in most cases) anyone can write or revise wiki entries, many instructors will not accept them as reliable sources for college-level research projects. Use wikis cautiously.

- **RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds** aggregate frequently updated sites, such as news sites and blogs, into links in a single Web page or e-mail. Most search engines provide this service, as do sites such as *NewzCrawler* (newzcrawler.com) and *FeedDemon* (feed demon.com). RSS feeds can be useful if you are researching news stories or political campaigns.

- **Social networking sites**, like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, allow users to create groups or pages on topics of interest or to follow the thoughts and activities of newsmakers.

- **Discussion lists** are electronic mailing lists that allow members to post comments and get feedback from others interested in the same topic. The most reliable discussion lists are moderated and attract experts on the topic. Many online communities provide some kind of indexing or search mechanism so that you can look for “threads” (conversations) related to your topic.

Although you need to evaluate the information you find in all sources carefully, you must be especially careful with information from social networking sites and discussion lists. However, such sources can provide up-to-the-minute information. Also be aware that whereas most online communities welcome guests and newcomers, others may perceive your questions as intrusive or naive. It may be useful to “lurk” (that is, just to read posts) before making a contribution.

## Conducting Field Research

In universities, government agencies, and the business world, field research can be as important as library research. In some majors, like education or sociology, as well as in service-learning courses, primary research projects are common. Even in the writing projects covered in Chapters 2–9, observations, interviews, and surveys may be useful or even necessary. As you consider how you might use field research in your writing projects, ask your instructor whether your institution requires you to obtain approval, and check Chapter 24, “Citing and Documenting Sources in MLA Style,” or 25, “Citing and Documenting Sources in APA Style,” for information about citing interviews you conduct yourself.
Conduct observational studies.

Observational studies, such as you would conduct when profiling a place (see Chapter 3), are common in college. To conduct an observational study effectively, follow these guidelines:

Planning an Observational Study

To ensure that your observational visits are productive, plan them carefully:

- **Arrange access if necessary.** Visits to a private location (such as a school or business) require special permission, so be sure to arrange your visit in advance. When making your request, state your intentions and goals for your study directly and fully. You may be surprised at how receptive people can be to a college student on assignment. But have a fallback plan in case your request is refused or the business or institution places constraints on you that hamper your research.

- **Develop a hypothesis.** In advance, write down a tentative assumption about what you expect to learn from your study—your hypothesis. This will guide your observations and notes, and you can adjust your expectations in response to what you observe if necessary. Consider, too, how your presence will affect those whom you are observing, so you can minimize your impact or take the effect of your presence into consideration.

- **Consider how best to conduct the observation.** Decide where to place yourself to make your observations most effective. Should you move around to observe from multiple vantage points, or will a single perspective be more productive?

Making Observations

Strategies for conducting your observation include the following:

- **Description:** Describe in detail the setting and the people you are observing. Note the physical arrangement and functions of the space, and the number, activities, and appearance of the people. Record as many details as possible, draw diagrams or sketches if helpful, and take photographs or videos if allowed (and if those you are observing do not object).

- **Narration:** Narrate the activities going on around you. Try initially to be an innocent observer: Pretend that you have never seen anything like this activity or place before, and explain what you are seeing step by step, even if what you are writing seems obvious. Include interactions among people, and capture snippets of conversations (in quotation marks) if possible.

- **Analysis and classification:** Break the scene down into its component parts, identify common threads, and organize the details into categories.
Take careful notes during your visit if you can do so unobtrusively or immediately afterwards if you can't. You can use a notebook and pencil, a laptop or tablet, or even a smartphone to record your notes. Choose whatever is least disruptive to those around you. You may need to use abbreviations and symbols to capture your observations on-site, but be sure to convert such shorthand into words and phrases as soon as possible after the visit so that you don't forget its significance.

**Writing Your Observational Study**

Immediately after your visit, fill in any gaps in your notes, and review your notes to look for meaningful patterns. You might find *mapping strategies*, such as *clustering* or *outlining*, useful for discovering patterns in your notes. Take some time to reflect on what you saw. Asking yourself questions like these might help:

- How did what I observed fit my own or my readers' likely preconceptions of the place or activity? Did my observations upset any of my preconceptions? What, if anything, seemed contradictory or out of place?
- What interested me most about the activity or place? What are my readers likely to find interesting about it?
- What did I learn?

Your purpose in writing about your visit is to share your insights into the meaning and significance of your observations. Assume that your readers have never been to the place, and provide enough detail for it to come alive for them. Decide on the perspective you want to convey, and choose the details necessary to convey your insights.

**PRACTICING THE GENRE**

**Collaborating on an Observational Study**

Arrange to meet with a small group (three or four students) for an observational visit somewhere on campus, such as the student center, gym, or cafeteria. Have each group member focus on a specific task, such as recording what people are wearing, doing, or saying, or capturing what the place looks, sounds, and smells like. After twenty to thirty minutes, report to one another on your observations. Discuss any difficulties that arise.

**Conduct interviews.**

A successful interview involves careful planning before the interview, but it also requires keen listening skills and the ability to ask appropriate follow-up questions while conducting the interview. Courtesy and consideration for your subject are crucial at all stages of the process.

**Planning the Interview**

Planning an interview involves the following:

- **Choosing an interview subject.** For a profile of an individual, your interview will be with one person; for a profile of an organization, you might interview
several people, all with different roles or points of view. Prepare a list of interview candidates, as busy people might turn you down.

- **Arranging the interview.** Give your prospective subject(s) a brief description of your project, and show some sincere enthusiasm for it. Keep in mind that the person you want to interview will be donating valuable time to you, so call ahead to arrange the interview, allow your subject to specify the amount of time she or he can spare, and come prepared.

### Preparing for the Interview

In preparation for the interview, consider your objectives:

- Do you want details or a general orientation (the "big picture") from this interview?
- Do you want this interview to lead you to interviews with other key people?
- Do you want mainly facts or opinions?
- Do you need to clarify something you have observed or read? If so, what?

Making an observational visit and doing some background reading beforehand can be helpful. Find out as much as you can about the organization or company (size, location, purpose, etc.), as well as the key people.

Good questions are key to a successful interview. You will likely want to ask a few **closed questions** (questions that request specific information) and a number of **open questions** (questions that give the respondent range and flexibility and encourage him or her to share anecdotes, personal revelations, and expressions of attitudes):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Questions</th>
<th>Closed Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▶ What do you think about ________?</td>
<td>▶ How do you do ________?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Describe your reaction when ________ happened.</td>
<td>▶ What does ________ mean?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▶ Tell me about a time you were ________.</td>
<td>▶ How was ________ developed?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The best questions encourage the subject to talk freely but stick to the point. You may need to ask a follow-up question to refocus the discussion or to clarify a point, so be prepared. If you are unsure about a subject’s answer, follow up by rephrasing the answer, prefacing it by saying something like “Let me see if I have this right” or “Am I correct in saying that you feel ________?” Avoid **forced-choice questions** (“Which do you think is the better approach: ________ or ________?”) and **leading questions** (“How well do you think ________ is doing?”).

### During the Interview

Another key to good interviewing is flexibility. Ask the questions you have prepared, but also be ready to shift gears to take full advantage of what your subject can offer.

- **Take notes.** Take notes during the interview, even if you are recording your discussion. You might find it useful to divide several pages of a notebook into two columns or to set up a word processing file in two columns. Use the left-hand
column to note details about the scene and your subject or about your impressions overall; in the right-hand column, write several questions and record the answers. Remember that how something is said is as important as what is said. Look for material that will give texture to your writing—gesture, verbal inflection, facial expression, body language, physical appearance (dress, hair) or anything that makes the person an individual.

- **Listen carefully.** Avoid interrupting your subject or talking about yourself; rather, listen carefully and guide the discussion by asking follow-up questions and probing politely for more information.

- **Be considerate.** Do not stay longer than the time you were allotted unless your subject agrees to continue the discussion, and show your appreciation for the time you have been given by thanking your subject and offering her or him a copy of your finished project.

### Following the Interview

After the interview, do the following:

- **Reflect on the interview.** As soon as you finish the interview, find a quiet place to reflect on it and to review and amplify your notes. Asking yourself questions like these might help: What did I learn? What seemed contradictory or surprising about the interview? How did what was said fit my own or my readers' likely expectations about the person, activity, or place? How can I summarize my impressions?

  Also make a list of any questions that arise. You may want to follow up with your subject for more information, but limit yourself to one e-mail or phone call to avoid becoming a bother.

- **Thank your subject.** Send your interview subject a thank-you note within twenty-four hours of the interview. Try to reference something specific from the interview, something surprising or thought-provoking. And send your subject a copy of your finished project with a note of appreciation.

### Practicing the Genre

**Interviewing a Classmate**

Practice interviewing a classmate:

- Spend five to ten minutes writing questions and thinking about what you’d like to learn.
- Spend ten minutes asking the questions you prepared, but also ask one or more follow-up questions in response to something your classmate has told you.
- Following the interview, spend a few minutes thinking about what you learned about your classmate and about conducting an interview. What might you do differently when conducting a formal interview?
Conduct surveys.

Surveys let you gauge the opinions and knowledge of large numbers of people. You might conduct a survey to gauge opinion in a political science course or to assess familiarity with a television show for a media studies course. You might also conduct a survey to assess the seriousness of a problem for a service-learning class or in response to an assignment to propose a solution to a problem (Chapter 7). This section briefly outlines procedures you can follow to carry out an informal survey, and it highlights areas where caution is needed. Colleges and universities have restrictions about the use and distribution of questionnaires, so check your institution’s policy or obtain permission before beginning the survey.

Designing Your Survey

Use the following tips to design an effective survey:

- **Conduct background research.** You may need to conduct background research on your topic. For example, to create a survey on scheduling appointments at the student health center, you may first need to contact the health center to determine its scheduling practices, and you may want to interview health center personnel.

- **Focus your study.** Before starting out, decide what you expect to learn (your hypothesis). Make sure your focus is limited—focus on one or two important issues—so you can craft a brief questionnaire that respondents can complete quickly and easily and so that you can organize and report on your results more easily.

- **Write questions.** Plan to use a number of closed questions (questions that request specific information), such as two-way questions, multiple-choice questions, ranking scale questions, and checklist questions (see Figure 21.4, p. 622). You will also likely want to include a few open questions (questions that give respondents the opportunity to write their answers in their own words). Closed questions are easier to tally, but open questions are likely to provide you with deeper insight and a fuller sense of respondents’ opinions. Whatever questions you develop, be sure that you provide all the answer options your respondents are likely to want, and make sure your questions are clear and unambiguous.

- **Identify the population you are trying to reach.** Even for an informal study, you should try to get a reasonably representative group. For example, to study satisfaction with appointment scheduling at the student health center, you would need to include a representative sample of all the students at the school—not only those who have visited the health center. Determine the demographic makeup of your school, and arrange to reach out to a representative sample.

- **Design the questionnaire.** Begin your questionnaire with a brief, clear introduction stating the purpose of your survey and explaining how you intend to use the results. Give advice on answering the questions, estimate the amount of time
This is a survey about scheduling appointments at the student health center. Your participation will help determine how long students have to wait to use the clinic's services and how these services might be more conveniently scheduled. The survey should take only 3 to 4 minutes to complete. All responses are confidential.

1. Have you ever made an appointment at the clinic?
   - Yes
   - No

2. How frequently have you had to wait more than 10 minutes at the clinic for a scheduled appointment?
   - Always
   - Usually
   - Occasionally
   - Never

3. Have you ever had to wait more than 30 minutes at the clinic for a scheduled appointment?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Uncertain

4. Based on your experience with the clinic, how would you rate its system for scheduling appointments?
   - 1 (poor)
   - 2 (adequate)
   - 3 (good)
   - 4 (excellent)

5. Given your present work and class schedule, which times during the day (Monday through Friday) would be the most and least convenient for you to schedule appointments at the clinic? (Rank your choices from 1 for most convenient time to 4 for least convenient time.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(most convenient)</td>
<td>(more convenient)</td>
<td>(less convenient)</td>
<td>(least convenient)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>morning (7 a.m.–noon)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>afternoon (noon–5 p.m.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dinnertime (5–7 p.m.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evening (7–10 p.m.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. If you have had an appointment at the student health center within the last six months, please evaluate your experience.

   [Blank space]

7. If you have had an appointment at the student health center within the last six months, please indicate what you believe would most improve scheduling of appointments at the clinic.

   [Blank space]

8. If you have *never* had an appointment at the student health center, please indicate why you have not made use of this service.

   [Blank space]

Thank you for your participation.

FIGURE 21.4 Sample Questionnaire: Scheduling at the Student Health Center
needed to complete the questionnaire, and—unless you are administering the survey in person—indicate the date by which completed surveys must be returned. Organize your questions by topic, from least to most complicated, or in any order that seems logical, and format your questionnaire so that it is easy to read and complete.

- **Test the questionnaire.** Ask at least three readers to complete your questionnaire before you distribute it. Time them as they respond, or ask them to keep track of how long they take to complete it. Discuss with them any confusion or problems they experience. Review their responses with them to be certain that each question is eliciting the information you want it to elicit. From what you learn, revise your questions and adjust the format of the questionnaire.

**Administering the Survey**

The more respondents you have, the better, but constraints of time and expense will almost certainly limit the number. As few as twenty-five could be adequate for an informal study, but to get twenty-five responses, you may need to solicit fifty or more participants.

You can conduct the survey in person or over the telephone; use an online service such as SurveyMonkey (surveymonkey.com) or Zoomerang (zoomerang.com); e-mail the questionnaires; or conduct the survey using a social media site such as Facebook. You may also distribute surveys to groups of people in class or around campus and wait to collect their responses.

Each method has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, face-to-face surveys allow you to get more in-depth responses, but participants may be unwilling to answer personal questions face to face. Though fewer than half the surveys you solicit using survey software are likely to be completed (your invitations may wind up in a spam folder), online software will tabulate responses automatically.

**Writing the Report**

When writing your report, include a summary of the results, as well as an interpretation of what the results mean.

- **Summarize the results.** Once you have the completed questionnaires, tally the results from the closed questions. (If you conducted the survey online, this will have already been done for you.) You can give the results from the closed questions as percentages, either within the text of your report or in one or more tables or graphs. Next, read all respondents’ answers to each open question to determine the variety of responses they gave, and classify the answers. You might classify them as positive, negative, or neutral or try grouping them into more specific categories. Finally, identify quotations that express a range of responses succinctly and engagingly to use in your report.

- **Interpret the results.** Once you have tallied the responses and read answers to open questions, think about what the results mean. Does the information you gathered support your hypothesis? If so, how? If the results do not support your
hypothesis, where did you go wrong? Was there a problem with the way you worded your questions or with the sample of the population you contacted? Or was your hypothesis in need of adjustment?

- **Write the report.** Research reports in the social sciences use a standard format, with headings introducing the following categories of information:
  
  - **Abstract:** A brief summary of the report, usually including one sentence summarizing each section
  
  - **Introduction:** Includes context for the study (other similar studies, if any, and their results), the question or questions the researcher wanted to answer and why this question (or these questions) is important, and the limits of what the researcher expected the survey to reveal
  
  - **Methods:** Includes the questionnaire, identifies the number and type of participants, and describes the methods used for administering the questionnaire and recording data
  
  - **Results:** Includes the data from the survey, with limited commentary or interpretation
  
  - **Discussion:** Includes the researcher's interpretation of results, an explanation of how the data support the hypothesis (or not), and the conclusions the researcher has drawn from the research