

Choosing a Topic and Planning Your Research

The first key to successful research is to define your topic carefully. A topic that is too broad will leave you without enough time to complete your assignment. A topic that is too narrow will leave you without enough information. A topic that does not interest you will leave you bored. Use the following guidelines to define a manageable and interesting topic:

1. Identify the general topic.

You may want to use the Topic Chooser in the Research Tools menu of *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*.

2. Ask yourself what you already know about the topic.
3. List several questions you would like to ask about this topic.
4. Choose the question that interests you most.
5. Develop this question in more detail by asking more questions.

Think of who, what, when, where, why, and how questions.

6. Think of at least ten keywords to use in your search for information.

Next, write a **thesis statement**—a sentence that tells the main idea or purpose of your report. As you research, you may need to revise your thesis statement. However, starting with a main idea will help you focus your research.

A thesis statement should express your view of the topic—an interesting point that you are trying to get across to the reader. It should not state an obvious fact. Here are examples of a poor thesis statement and a good thesis statement:

Poor Thesis Statement:
(states an obvious fact)

There are many types of sharks.

Good Thesis Statement:
(expresses an opinion)

No animal has been more misunderstood than the shark.

To further focus your research, make a **rough outline**—a list of types of information to look for. Your teacher may have told you what your report should include. Refer also to questions 5 and 6 above.

Finding Information

Getting Information from *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*

Here are some ways to find information in the encyclopedia:

1. Word Search in the Find window

Use Word Search to see a list of everything that mentions a certain word. Click "Tips" to see how to narrow your search. Use the article menu to find where the search word appears in the article, to highlight relevant information, or to print the article.

2. List of Contents A-Z in the Find window

Try the alphabetical list of contents to go directly to the main article on a subject.

3. Topic Chooser

Topic Chooser in the Research Tools menu helps you explore topics by category.

4. Web Link Directory

The Web Link Directory in the Online menu helps you locate links from encyclopedia articles to sites on the World Wide Web. As in the Topic Chooser, topics are organized by category.

5. Ask the Librarian

Use this Online feature to get advice from a librarian on how to get information on your topic.

Getting Information from Other Sources

The encyclopedia is a good place to start your research but not to finish it. After using the encyclopedia to get an overview of the topic, look for additional information in other sources. The sources you use will depend on the type of information you are looking for:

Source	Type of Information
Atlas	Maps and geographic information
Almanac	Collections of facts and statistics, updated yearly
Books	History, literature, essays, biography, art, science
Encyclopedia	General information on a wide variety of topics
Magazine	Specialized articles, published at regular intervals
Newspaper	Daily news
Online source	All kinds of facts, statistics, news, opinions, images, and sounds; information about organizations and companies

Use the above table and the following questions to figure out where to look for information. Remember that some information may be found in more than one source.

- Do you need a general overview?
- Do you need statistics?
- How recent does your information need to be?
- Do you need information about government leaders?
- Would scientific data be helpful?
- Are you looking for personal accounts or stories?
- Do you need information about historical events?
- Do you need information about animals?

[Click here to see how to evaluate information.](#)

Evaluating Information

After finding information, you need to evaluate, or judge, whether it is useful for your report. Test the information for relevance, reliability, accuracy, and objectivity.

Relevance: Does it relate to your topic?

Decide whether the source is relevant to your topic. Skim it to get a general idea whether the information seems useful for your assignment. Here are some ways to ask yourself whether a source is relevant:

Does the title or subtitle address your topic?

Does the table of contents have chapters or sections on your topic?

If you use a book, does the index contain entries for most of your keywords?

If you use a newspaper or magazine, does it have headings or subheadings relating to your topic?

If you use the results of an online search, is your topic among the first entries?

Is the date of publication appropriate for your purpose?

Does the type of source match your need?

Reliability: Is the source an authority on the topic?

Some sources are more reliable than others. Use the following guidelines to check trustworthiness:

Check the author's credentials.

Who is the author?

What credentials does the author have to be providing this information?

What organization or group does the author belong to?

Does the author include a bibliography or links to other sources of information?

Check the publisher.

If you are looking at a Web site, does the Internet address tell who posted the information?

Is the publisher a well-known company or government agency?

Is the publisher an individual or a little-known group?

If the source is a Web site, was it specifically recommended to you? By whom?

Check the date.

If the source is a Web site, has it been updated recently?

If the source is a book or periodical, was it published recently enough to be useful?

Check the purpose.

Does the source clearly state its purpose?

Is the source intended to inform?

Is the source intended to explain?

Is the source intended to influence behavior such as voting or buying?

Accuracy: Are the statements of fact true?

A statement of fact is a piece of information that can be either proved or disproved. An opinion is a judgment that represents someone's beliefs or feelings. An opinion cannot be proved or disproved. If a source makes statements of fact, you need to check that the statements are accurate. Do not assume that something is true simply because it appears in print or on the Internet. Ask the following questions to help judge the accuracy of information:

Is the information up-to-date, or current?

Is the information from a reliable author or publisher?

Is the information from a primary source—a firsthand eyewitness account or original research? Or is it from a secondary source—a report of someone else's work?

A primary source is not necessarily more accurate than a secondary source. However, knowing what kind of source you are looking at will help you evaluate it.

Can these facts be checked in other sources of information?

Does the information contradict something you have seen elsewhere?

Objectivity: Is the source fair and evenhanded?

Does the source just present one viewpoint, or does it look at all sides? Some sources cleverly disguise an opinion as fact. They may seem objective, when in fact they have a biased, or slanted, view. Ask questions such as the following to detect bias in a source:

Does the author clearly identify whether a statement is an opinion by saying "I think" or "I believe," or are opinions stated as if they were facts?

Does the author make statements that can be proved?

Does the author exaggerate, using words like *every*, *never*, *none*, and *always*?

Does the source present different viewpoints on the topic? Does it do so accurately?
Does the source use “loaded” words that make something sound either good or bad?
Does the source appeal to the reader’s or viewer’s emotions? If so, how?
Does the source make sweeping generalizations that cannot be proved?

Taking Notes

If you have evaluated a source and decided that it is useful, you are ready to take notes. Keep referring back to your **thesis statement** and **rough outline** to make sure you are gathering information that is related to your topic.

[Click here to review how to evaluate sources.](#)

Notecards are an effective way of taking notes because they help you sort information. A notecard has three parts: Title, Body, and Source

Notecard Title

The title should be a short, clear label telling what the card is about. Each card should be about one idea. For example, a notecard for research on sharks might be titled "Shark Teeth." Mixing different ideas on the same card, such as "Shark Teeth and Eyesight," would make it hard to organize your notes.

Notecard Body

The information you put in the body of your notecard will depend on your purpose and the type of source. At all times, however, avoid **plagiarism**—stealing someone else's words or ideas and passing them off as your own.

The body of the notecard might contain one or more of the following five kinds of information: direct quotation, paraphrase, summary, statement of fact, or your own idea. Suppose you are doing a report on President John Adams. You find the following information in an article by historian Pauline Maier in the May-June 1998 issue of *American Heritage* magazine:

"Adams's record of public service is extraordinary. He was Congress's most insistent champion of independence, a man who returned to the field day after day, like a baseball player. He remained in Philadelphia through the winter of 1775-76 and in mid-May (when Jefferson finally returned after five months in Virginia) shepherded through Congress a resolution for the suppression of all authority under the Crown and the establishment of new state governments founded on popular consent. Adams was on the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence, but he left the writing to Jefferson. He had more important things to do, such as preparing a draft treaty with France and rounding up votes for independence."

After making sure that you understand the meaning of the passage, your next step is to decide what kinds of notes to take. Below are descriptions of the different types of notes. Each description is followed by an example relating to the above passage on John Adams.

Direct Quotation from a Source

A **direct quotation** is copying words exactly as they appear in a source. When you quote a source, you must use quotation marks before and after the quotation. If you leave out words, use an ellipsis (three spaced periods) where the missing words would be. Identify who made the statement.

Direct quotations are especially useful when you want the reader to see the author's own words. Perhaps the author made a point in a particularly interesting way. When you quote directly, add your comment about the meaning of the quotation.

Sample:

Report Starter: Edit Card [X]

Card Name:
Positive view--Maier

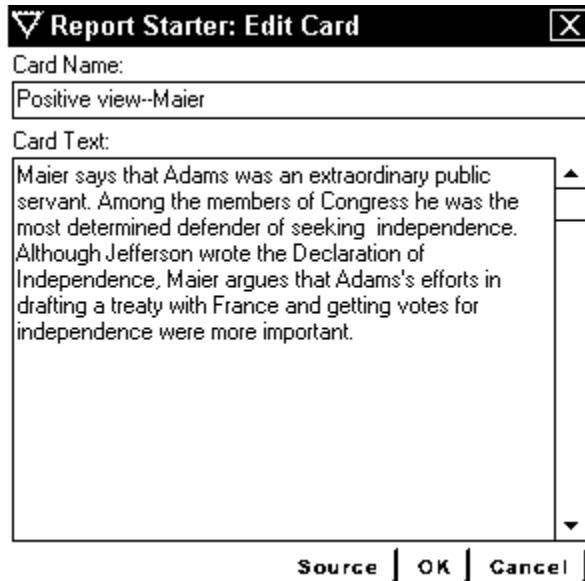
Card Text:
"He was Congress's most insistent champion of independence, a man who returned to the field day after day, like a baseball player."
Maier stresses that Adams was persistent and tireless in arguing for independence.

Source OK Cancel

Paraphrase from a Source

A **paraphrase** is a restatement of the ideas from a source using slightly different words. Paraphrasing is useful when you want to state an author's idea but do not need to use the author's exact words. Keep in mind, though, that you are still using the author's ideas. To avoid plagiarism, you must identify the author as the source of those ideas.

Sample:



Report Starter: Edit Card [X]

Card Name:
Positive view-Maier

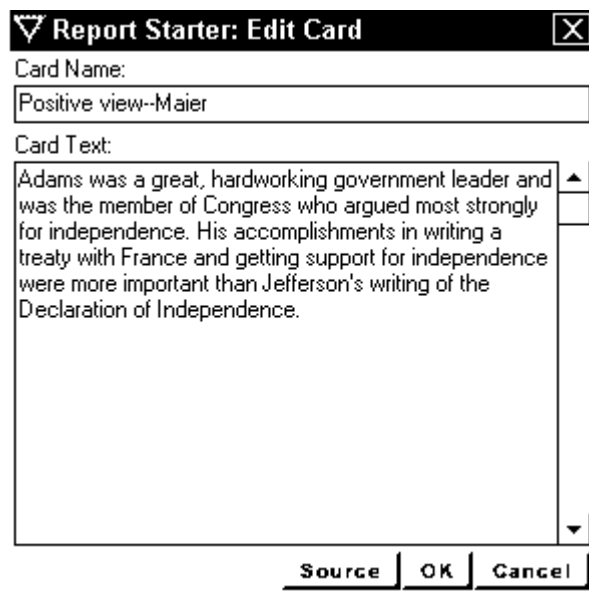
Card Text:
Maier says that Adams was an extraordinary public servant. Among the members of Congress he was the most determined defender of seeking independence. Although Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, Maier argues that Adams's efforts in drafting a treaty with France and getting votes for independence were more important.

Source | **OK** | **Cancel**

Summary of a Source

A **summary** is a statement of the main ideas of a source passage using your own words. It is a shortened version of the information in the passage.

Sample:



Report Starter: Edit Card [X]

Card Name:
Positive view-Maier

Card Text:
Adams was a great, hardworking government leader and was the member of Congress who argued most strongly for independence. His accomplishments in writing a treaty with France and getting support for independence were more important than Jefferson's writing of the Declaration of Independence.

Source | **OK** | **Cancel**

Statement of Fact

You may simply write down a true **statement of fact** that can be found in any basic source on the subject. Since the information is a commonly accepted fact, you do not have to give the source special credit within the text of your report. Of course, the source should still be listed in the bibliography at the end of your report.

Sample:

Report Starter: Edit Card [X]

Card Name:
Positive view--Maier

Card Text:
Adams was a member of the committee to write the Declaration of Independence.

Source | OK | Cancel

Your Own Idea

Your report must not be simply a combination of information from other sources. You must think about the information and tell what it means to you.

Sample:

Report Starter: Edit Card [X]

Card Name:
Positive view--Maier

Card Text:
In praising Adams's accomplishments, Maier does not give Jefferson enough credit for the important act of writing the Declaration of Independence.

Source | OK | Cancel

Remember to avoid plagiarism. As much as possible, summarize information and add your own opinions and observations. When using a direct quotation or paraphrase is appropriate, be sure to identify the source.

Notecard Source

You need to provide source information for three main reasons:

1. To give credit to the sources you have used.
2. To help readers locate sources if they want to research the topic.
3. To help you check information or prove where you got the information.

Report Starter shows you what information to include for each type of source. When taking notes away from your computer, print out the Citing Sources section of these Research Tips. When you return to your computer, enter the title, body, source of each notecard into your Report Starter file.

[Click here for information about citing sources.](#)

Organizing Your Notes

Refer to your preliminary **thesis statement** and your **rough outline** to get started organizing your notes. Report Starter helps you to do the two main tasks of organizing:

- Sorting notecards into groups of related ideas.
- Putting notecard groups into an order that makes sense.

To organize your notecards, follow these steps:

1. Click “Sort into Groups.” Look for similar ideas in the card titles.

Refer to the ideas in your rough outline to help identify similarities between card titles.

2. When you find similar ideas, think of labels to identify how they are alike.

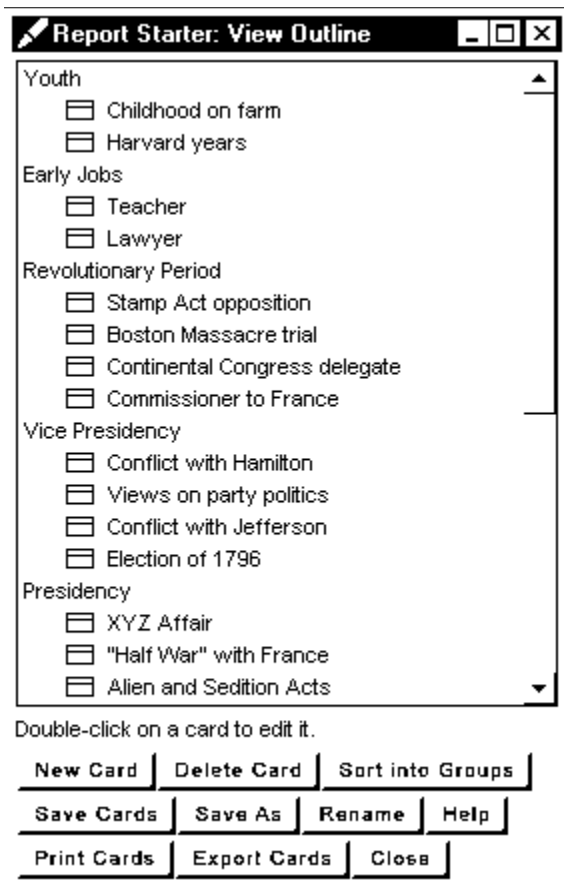
Try filling in the blanks in the following sentence: “[Card title] and [card title] are types of _____.” Suppose that for research on sharks you have cards titled “Eyesight” and “Smell.” You could fill in the sentence: “Eyesight and smell are types of senses.”

3. Use the labels to name groups.

In the example above, you could create a group named “Shark Senses.”

4. Put the groups in order.

Use the “Sort into Groups” window to move groups up and down. Click “Done Sorting” to see the changes in your outline. Below is part of a sample notecard outline for research on President John Adams.



5. Double-click on a group to change the order of its cards or to remove a card from the group.

To check if a card is in the right place, you may need to review the information on the card. Double-click on the card to see it in the “View Card” window. This window is only for viewing the card, not editing it. (If you want to edit the card, go to the “View

Outline” window and double-click on the card.)

Clicking “Remove Card” will remove the card from the group and place it with the unsorted cards. To put the card into another group, click “Done Sorting” to return to the “Sort into Groups” window. Then drag the card into another group.

6. After you have sorted cards and groups, check the order of titles in the View Outline window.

You will probably revise your outline several times to get the ideas in the order you want. Select “Print” to get a printout of your outline and notecards.

As you review your notes and sort your notecards, you might change the order of ideas from your rough outline. Also, depending on the information you find, you might revise your thesis statement. As you organize your notes, keep returning to the “View Outline” window to check that your information is in a good order and supports your thesis statement.

Making Your Rough Draft

After organizing your notes, you are ready to start writing your rough draft. You may find that you need to do more than one rough draft. Your report will include three main parts:

Introduction

Your introductory paragraph should catch your readers' interest and let them know what your report will be about. Your thesis statement goes at the end of your introductory paragraph. When writing the first draft of your report, you might start by just writing down the thesis statement. Then do the rest of the introduction after doing the first draft of the body.

Body

The body is the main part of your report, where you present information to support your thesis statement. Use your notecard outline to help you organize the body of your report. Remember that each paragraph in the body must have a topic sentence that tells the main idea of the paragraph.

Conclusion

The concluding paragraph summarizes the main points that support your thesis statement. It tells the reader the most important things to remember about the topic.

Remember that writing a report is not just putting together a collection of notecards. The report is something that you create using mostly your own words. If you use a direct quotation or paraphrase, identify where the information came from. Copying information without crediting the source is plagiarism. When you use a direct quotation or paraphrase in a paragraph, make sure it fits in smoothly and explain what it means in your own words. There are two main methods to use Report Starter in writing your report:

From Notecards to Report: Method 1

1. Open the "View Outline" window and move the window to the left side of your screen.
2. Go to encyclopedia "Research Tools" menu and click on "Word Processor."
3. Make the "WordPad" window smaller and move it to the right side of the screen so that it is side by side with the Report Starter "View Outline" window.

If you want, you can open a new document using another word processor Instead of WordPad.

4. Click the minimize button for *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia* to hide the encyclopedia.
5. Now you can look at your outline and your report document at the same time.

With Method 1 you can rearrange the ideas by moving the cards up or down in the outline. To view notecards, open each card one at a time.

From Notecards to Report: Method 2

1. Open the "View Outline" window and click "Export."
- Exporting makes a copy of your notecards that you can open with a word processor.
2. Click the minimize button on Report Starter to hide the window.
3. Open the exported file, make the window smaller, and move it to the left side of the screen.
4. Open a new document using a word processor, make the window smaller, and move the window to the right side of the screen.

You can select "Word Processor" from the encyclopedia "Research Tools" menu or use another word processor.

5. Now you can look at your notecard information and your report document at the same time.

With Method 2 all the notecard information is in one document. To rearrange the ideas, cut and paste within the document.

Keep in mind that because Report Starter is a separate application, you can open it from your Programs menu and run it without starting the encyclopedia.

Keeping Track of Your Sources

As you draft your report, you may decide to use information from some notecards but not others. When you use a direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary of a source, copy and paste the author and/or title of the source from the notecard. Put parentheses around this source information. Later, when writing your final draft, you can use the information to make sure you cite the sources you used. The way you cite the sources will depend on your teacher's instructions.

[Click here for information on citing sources.](#)

Guide Questions for Revising Your Report

To check a rough draft, ask yourself questions about how well your report is organized:

Introduction

Is the beginning paragraph interesting? Will it get my reader's attention?

Do I let my reader know what the report will be about?

Is my thesis statement clear, and does it tell my view of the topic?

Body

Does each paragraph have a clear topic sentence?

Does each paragraph support my thesis statement?

Are the paragraphs in an order that makes sense?

Are any direct quotations or paraphrases woven smoothly into the paragraphs?

Does the report flow smoothly from paragraph to paragraph?

Conclusion

Does the concluding paragraph support my thesis statement without simply repeating it?

Have I made it clear what main points the reader should remember?

As you check the organization of your report, check the spelling, punctuation, and grammar of your sentences.

Making Your Final Draft

When you have revised your report, you are ready to make your final draft. Your report will include a title page, outline, final draft, and a listing of the sources you used. Follow your teacher's instructions on how to show your sources. See the Citing Sources section for an overview of three main methods.

[Click here for information on citing sources.](#)

Guide Questions for Checking Your Final Draft

Format

Is my report set up according to my teacher's instructions?

___ margins and line spacing

___ title page

___ outline

___ citation of sources

___ rough draft attached (if required)

___ research notes attached (if required)

Organization

Is my thesis statement clear, and does it tell my view of the topic?

Do all the paragraphs have topic sentences?

Do all paragraphs support my thesis statement?

Are the paragraphs in an order that makes sense?

Are the sources cited according to my teacher's instructions?

Does the concluding paragraph summarize the main points without repeating the introduction?

Does the report flow smoothly from paragraph to paragraph?

Spelling/Punctuation/Grammar

Have I checked all the spelling?

Have I checked punctuation and grammar?

___ no sentence fragments or run-on sentences

___ correct use of quotation marks and ellipsis

___ correct grammar (subject-verb agreement, verb tense, etc)

Bibliography or Works Cited list

Have I listed the sources in alphabetical order?

Have I listed all the sources used?

Have I listed the sources in the correct way?

Citing Sources

Depending on your teacher's instructions, your final paper may show source credits in one of the following three ways. Check how your teacher wants the sources to be cited.

1. Endnotes followed by a Bibliography

Endnotes are a numbered list of the sources you used in the report. Next to each number is an abbreviation of the source. The number is also inserted within your report at the place where you used the source. The bibliography is an alphabetical list of all the sources you researched, including those you did not use in your final report. The reader can tell from the endnotes which sources you used and which ones are just for reference for further reading.

2. Footnotes followed by a Bibliography

With footnotes, numbers are inserted within your report with the source abbreviations appearing at the bottoms of the pages. Again, the bibliography is an alphabetical list of all the sources you researched, including those you did not use in your final report.

3. Parenthetical citations followed by a Works Cited list

Parenthetical citations are source abbreviations included in parentheses within the paragraphs of your report. The Works Cited list is an alphabetical list of only the sources you actually cited in the report. A teacher may ask for both a Works Cited list and a Bibliography.

Whether you identify the sources by number or by parenthetical citations within your report, the complete source information is typically listed in the Bibliography or Works Cited list according to the MLA (Modern Language Association) guidelines. Here are typical types of sources, with the information usually required for each type:

Book or Pamphlet

Author(s)
Article or part title (if any)
Book or pamphlet title
Editor (if any)
Edition
Volume(s) (if any)
City where published
Publisher
Year

Sample:

Spencer, James, Elizabeth Howard, and Terence Taylor. "Philosophers and Poets of Antarctica." *Who's Who in Antarctica*. Ed. Christine Todd. 4th ed. Vol. 22. New York: Acme Press, 1997.

Note: Page numbers are not usually required for books in a Bibliography or Works Cited list. Record them in your notes, though, so you can find the information again easily and use page numbers in endnotes, footnotes, or parenthetical citations.

CD-ROM or Diskette

Author(s)
Article title (if any)
Title of CD-ROM or diskette
Edition
Source type (e.g., CD-ROM)
City where published
Publisher
Year

Sample:

Spencer, James, Elizabeth Howard, and Terence Taylor. "Animals of the Amazon." *Wild Animals*. 1997 ed. CD-ROM. New York: Acme Multimedia, 1997.

Print Encyclopedia

Author(s)

Article title (if any)
Encyclopedia title
Edition
City where published
Publisher
Year

Sample:

Spencer, James, Elizabeth Howard, and Terence Taylor. "Aardvark." *Encyclopedia of Animals*. 14th ed. New York: Acme Press, 1997.

Newspaper or Magazine

Author(s)
Article title
Newspaper or magazine title
Date
Page number(s)

Sample:

Spencer, James, Elizabeth Howard, and Terence Taylor. "Cleaning Your Room." *Homeowners' Weekly* 12 Oct. 1997: 70-82.

Journal

Author(s)
Article title
Journal title
Volume
Issue
Year
Page number(s)

Sample:

Spencer, James, Elizabeth Howard, and Terence Taylor. "Animals of the Amazon." *Amazon Monthly* 24.3 (1997): 56-67.

Web Site, FTP Site, or Online Service

Author(s)
Article title
Site title
Publisher
Year
Source type (e.g., Web Site)
Online location (URL for Web/FTP sites or name of online service)
Date accessed

Sample:

Spencer, James, Elizabeth Howard, and Terence Taylor. "The World Wide Web in Education: A Closer Look." *EdWeb*. Educational Services Inc. 1996. Online. Prodigy. (3 June 1996).

TV or radio program

Title of episode
Title of program
Network
Call letters and city of local station
Broadcast date

Sample:

"Animals of the Arctic." *Wild World*. Acme Entertainment Network. WWTT, Chicago. 3 June 1996.

Film, Videotape, or Videodisc

Title

Director

Distributor

Year

Sample:

It's a Wonderful Life. Dir. Frank Capra. RKO. 1946.

Personal Interview

Person interviewed

Title of person

Date

Sample:

Andretti, Andrea. Orchestra conductor. Personal interview. 21 Oct. 1997.

