



ATLAS CONCORDAT FIRST EDITION

The Atlas Research Field Guide

A practical system for finding, testing, connecting, and presenting information.

Method, controls, working pages, and examples for research that must remain useful after close review.

WHAT THIS IS

A field manual for serious research work. It shows how to define the question, locate and test sources, preserve provenance, connect evidence, control uncertainty, and design a final product for its actual use.

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The system at a glance

Read the method once. On later projects, begin with the working page named at the end of each chapter and return to the relevant control when the record changes.

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THE CONTROL CHAIN

Use defines the question. The question defines the source standard. Sources support claims. Claims form a synthesis. The intended audience and decision determine the final form. Verification tests the entire chain in reverse.

CHAPTER 01

Define the use before the search

The first research decision is not where to search. It is what the finished work must enable someone to do.

Start with the use

A broad topic invites accumulation. A defined use creates selection criteria. Compare “research artificial intelligence regulation” with “prepare a five page briefing for a board that must decide whether a proposed customer service system requires additional privacy review.” The subject may be the same. The useful record is not.

State the audience, decision, deadline, form, and risk before drafting search terms. These facts determine the necessary depth, currency, jurisdiction, technical level, and treatment of uncertainty. They also expose requests that cannot responsibly be answered within the available time or record.

Write a question that can be tested

A workable research question names a subject, relationship, context, and boundary. It can be broken into smaller questions, and evidence can change the answer. If the question merely asks for material “about” something, it is not yet ready.

Use operational verbs. Determine, compare, trace, identify, test, explain, quantify, map, or distinguish. Avoid verbs that prejudge the result, such as prove, expose, or validate, unless the work is explicitly testing a stated hypothesis against contrary evidence.

Fix the boundary and the stop rule

Every project needs exclusions. Name the jurisdictions, dates, populations, document types, languages, or analytical questions that are outside scope. An exclusion is not an admission of weakness. It is a statement about what the result can and cannot support.

Set a stop rule before the record becomes large. A search may stop when the controlling sources have been found, the central claim is saturated by independent evidence, new sources repeat known propositions, or the allotted time expires. Record which condition ended the search.

Control	What it records
Audience	Who will use the work, and what can they reasonably understand without additional explanation?
Decision	What question, choice, filing, design, chapter, or conversation will the work support?
Risk	What is the consequence of error, omission, delay, or disclosure?
Form	What output can be used at the moment of need?

Working control: Working page 01: Project brief

CHAPTER 04

Search in deliberate passes

A defensible search is not a single query. It is a recorded sequence that moves from orientation to authority, then tests the emerging answer for omissions and contradiction.

Pass one: establish vocabulary and terrain

Use trusted overviews, reference works, database subject headings, known authorities, and a small number of representative sources to learn the language of the field. Record synonyms, former names, acronyms, technical terms, jurisdictions, date conventions, and names of likely repositories.

This pass should improve the question, not answer it. Treat early results as provisional. Note which terms produce noise and which terms reveal a more precise vocabulary.

Pass two: retrieve direct and authoritative sources

Search the repositories most likely to hold the required evidence. Use field restrictions, phrase searching, Boolean operators, controlled vocabulary, citations, dates, jurisdiction filters, file types, and site restrictions as appropriate. In PubMed, for example, Search Details exposes how a query was translated, which can reveal an unexpected mapping or omission. [5]

Log enough detail for another careful researcher to reproduce the path: service or repository, date, exact query, filters, result count when available, items retained, and the reason for the next change.

Pass three: follow the network

Move backward through references and authorities cited by a useful source. Move forward through later sources that cite it. Search by author, organization, doctrine, dataset, case, trial registration, archive collection, or distinctive phrase. Use related item functions, bibliographies, finding aids, and subject headings to expose adjacent material.

Citation chasing is especially useful when terminology has changed or the important record is poorly indexed. It can also reproduce the bias of an influential starting source, so use more than one entry point.

Pass four: attack the answer

Search for contrary findings, negative results, corrections, retractions, dissents, superseding authority, implementation failures, alternative explanations, and excluded populations. Reverse the key conclusion and search it directly. Look for sources that a critic would use.

A search is not complete merely because supportive evidence has become repetitive. It is complete when the project has met its predeclared stop rule and the material counterevidence has been sought and recorded.

Control	What it records
Query	Exact search string, including syntax and field restrictions.
Environment	Database, archive, catalog, repository, search engine, or record system.
Yield	Candidates found, items retained, and the reason for excluding material results.
Change	What the pass taught you and how the next query changed.

Working control: Working page 05: Search log

CHAPTER 07

Link claims, evidence, and uncertainty

The claim to source matrix is the central control. It shows what each important proposition rests on and where the record remains weak.

Use one row per material claim

Write claims at the level a reviewer can test. “The policy changed in 2022” may be too broad if different provisions changed on different dates. Split compound claims when the components rely on different evidence or levels of confidence.

For each claim, record the supporting source identifiers, exact locators, support type, contrary sources, qualification, confidence, and planned use. A claim without a locator is not ready for the final work.

Triangulate when the stakes require it

Independent agreement matters more than repetition. Ten articles that copy one press release are one evidentiary path. Two independent measurements using different methods may offer stronger support than a large number of derivative summaries.

Triangulation can occur across source types, methods, observers, jurisdictions, dates, or datasets. Record whether the sources are genuinely independent and whether their definitions are comparable.

Make uncertainty visible

Use a confidence label tied to a reason. High may mean direct, current, controlling, and independently corroborated. Moderate may mean credible but incomplete, contextual, or dependent on a reasonable inference. Low may mean contested, single source, poor access, uncertain provenance, or material scope mismatch.

Do not average contradictions into a false middle. Describe the disagreement, identify what drives it, and state what additional evidence could resolve it.

Control	What it records
Claim ID	Stable identifier for one proposition.
Support	Source identifiers and locators that carry the proposition.
Counterevidence	Material source that conflicts, limits, or supplies an alternative explanation.
Disposition	Use, qualify, narrow, defer, or omit.

Working control: Working page 08: Claim to source matrix

APPENDIX A

Worked example: public legal record

A chronology and issue map built from public authority, designed to support orientation and further legal research. It is not legal advice.

COMMISSION BRIEF

Question: What did the Supreme Court decide about the first fair use factor in *Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. v. Goldsmith*, 598 U.S. 508 (2023), and which distinctions matter when the decision is applied to a new use?

Date	Event	Record	Analytical use
1981	Lynn Goldsmith photographs Prince during a studio session.	598 U.S. 508, opinion record	Establishes the original work and its purpose.
1984	Vanity Fair licenses one photograph as an artist reference. Andy Warhol creates an image for the article.	Opinion record and license described by the Court	Separates the licensed reference use from later uses.
2016	Condé Nast licenses Orange Prince from the Warhol Foundation for a magazine commemorating Prince.	Opinion record	Identifies the challenged commercial use.
2023	The Supreme Court holds that the purpose and character of the challenged license did not favor fair use.	598 U.S. 508	States the controlling first factor conclusion.

Claim control

Claim	Support	Qualification
The challenged use was the 2016 commercial license.	Majority opinion, 598 U.S. 508	Do not generalize the holding to every use of the Prince Series.
The two uses shared a substantially similar purpose.	Majority analysis of magazine portrait uses	Purpose is assessed in relation to the specific challenged use.
New meaning alone does not decide factor one.	Majority discussion of transformation and justification	New expression may still matter within the statutory analysis.

The complete fourteen page public record specimen is available from Atlas Concordat and shows the full source linked chronology, issue map, proposition matrix, and decision brief.

APPENDIX B

Worked example: medical evidence map

A method example showing how an evidence question becomes a structured map. It does not answer a clinical question and is not medical advice.

COMMISSION BRIEF

Question: For adults with a defined chronic condition, what does the current evidence say about a specified intervention's effect on a specified patient important outcome, compared with usual care, during a defined follow up period?

Question architecture

Element	Definition required	Why it matters
Population	Diagnosis, severity, age, setting, and key exclusions	Prevents evidence from a different population being treated as directly applicable.
Intervention	Dose, duration, delivery, and cointerventions	Distinguishes nominally similar interventions.
Comparator	Usual care, placebo, alternative, or baseline	Determines what the effect estimate actually compares.
Outcome	Measure, time point, direction, and patient importance	Prevents surrogate and patient important outcomes from being conflated.
Design	Eligible study designs and rationale	Aligns evidence type with the question and risk of bias.

Evidence map, not verdict

For each included source, record the population, intervention, comparator, outcomes, follow up, design, sample size, effect estimate, uncertainty, limitations, funding, and applicability. Keep study findings separate from the reviewer's conclusion. If a systematic review is reported with PRISMA 2020, record which checklist and flow elements were actually followed rather than using PRISMA as a quality label. [3]

REQUIRED BOUNDARY

A research map can organize evidence and identify uncertainty. Clinical interpretation and patient care decisions require appropriately qualified professionals and current guidance.

APPENDIX C

Worked example: writer's research dossier

A research architecture for a historical novelist who needs usable detail, not a pile of links.

COMMISSION BRIEF

Need: Build a dossier for three scenes set in a European port city during one month in 1911. The writer needs street level sensory detail, travel times, work routines, prices, technologies, and period vocabulary, with uncertainty marked and anachronisms controlled.

Scene need	Source path	Deliverable
Movement through the city	Period maps, timetables, street directories, transport rules, weather record	Annotated route with plausible travel windows and friction points
Work and material culture	Trade manuals, catalogs, photographs, newspapers, municipal records, memoirs	Object and routine cards with source images and vocabulary
Voice and public knowledge	Newspapers, letters, advertisements, popular manuals, speeches	Language bank separated by speaker, context, and date
Anachronism control	Patent dates, catalogs, technical histories, dictionaries, archive records	Red flag list with earliest verified use and unresolved items

What the writer receives

- A scene indexed dossier, not a chronological bibliography.
- A source card for each consequential detail, including date and place limits.
- A short list of verified details that can carry the scene without explanatory exposition.
- A contradiction and uncertainty note where sources disagree or the record is silent.
- A final anachronism check against the actual scene date and setting.

Claim to source matrix

Link each material proposition to exact support, counterevidence, qualification, and disposition.

Claim ID and proposition	Source and locator	Support type	Counterevidence or limit	Disposition

WORKING PAGE 16

Final verification record

Complete this page against the actual delivery file, not an earlier draft.

- ☐ Every material factual proposition has an appropriate citation or source identifier.
- ☐ Every quotation, number, date, name, and locator matches the underlying source.
- ☐ Each citation supports the proposition at the level and scope stated.
- ☐ Primary and controlling sources were checked where the project standard requires them.
- ☐ Contrary evidence and material alternative explanations are fairly represented.
- ☐ Inferences are visible and are not presented as source language or observed fact.
- ☐ The answer matches the project brief, approved scope, audience, and intended use.
- ☐ Jurisdiction, population, dates, definitions, units, and versions are consistent.

- ☐ Corrections, retractions, superseding authority, and later material were checked as required.
- ☐ The document states a current through date where currency is material.
- ☐ Limits, unresolved conflicts, evidence gaps, and confidence are stated specifically.
- ☐ Links, bookmarks, table headings, page breaks, file name, and print layout were tested.
- ☐ Metadata, personal data, confidentiality markings, access, and delivery channel were reviewed.
- ☐ Artificial intelligence assistance was verified and disclosed where required.
- ☐ The final file contains no comments, tracked changes, hidden text, or draft instructions.
- ☐ A reader can find the answer, its basis, and the next consequential question quickly.

Verified by and date

Name, role, date, and document version.

Known exceptions

List any item not completed and its consequence.

Delivery record

File name, current through date, recipient, channel, and retention action.
