Craft of Research (CoR): Chapter 5 – From Problems to Sources

The 10 salient sentence strings presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

1. If you plunge into any and all sources on your topic, you risk losing yourself in an endless trail of books and articles. To be sure, aimless browsing can be fun, even productive. We indulge in it a lot. Many important discoveries have begun in a chance encounter with an unexpected idea.
2. Because they are intended for broad audiences who are unfamiliar with the topics that they address, they can sometimes oversimplify the research on which they are based, and they are susceptible to becoming outdated.
3. The important thing, ultimately, is not what you *call* your sources but how well you *use* them to address your research problems, develop new ideas, and make interesting arguments.
4. The only embarrassing question is the one you *failed to ask* but should have.
5. Novice researchers often rely too heavily on only a few terms or on terms that prove to be too broad—or narrow—to call up relevant sources. Successful researchers know that they have to be flexible: searches typically involve trial and error to discover those terms that will yield the most relevant sources.
6. On the other hand, if you find nothing, your topic may be too narrow or too far off the beaten track to yield quick results. But you could also be on to an important question that nobody else has thought about, at least not for a while.
7. Chances are you'll make something of a neglected topic only through your own hard thinking. In the long run, that research might make you famous, but it probably won't work for a paper due in a few weeks.
8. In contrast to your library's catalogs and databases, the Internet is essentially unmonitored. There is no one to vouch for the credibility of materials posted to, and sent from, countless websites.
9. Error is bad, but dishonesty is worse.
10. One of the paradoxes of twenty-first-century research is that even as new technologies allow us to access an unprecedented wealth of materials with unprecedented ease, research has also become more personal. So as you undertake your project, don't forget about the human element.