



RESEARCH SKILLS

RESEARCH: WHERE TO BEGIN

- ❑ **Research isn't something that only scientists and professors do.**
- ❑ **Any time you use sources to investigate claims or reach new conclusions, you are performing research.**
- ❑ **Research happens in virtually all fields, so it's vitally important to know how to conduct research and navigate through source material regardless of your professional or academic role.**

RESEARCH: WHERE TO BEGIN

■ **Choosing and Narrowing Your Research Topic.**

If your instructor gives you the flexibility to choose your own research topic, you might begin by brainstorming a list of topics that interest you. Once you find something that grabs your attention, the next step is to narrow your topic to a manageable scope. Some ways to narrow your focus are by sub-topic, demographic, or time period.

■ **Writing Your Research Question.**

Writing your research topic as a question helps you focus your topic concisely.

■ **Knowing What Types of Sources You Need.**

Depending on the type of research you're doing, you may need to use different types of sources. Research is usually divided into scholarly and popular, and primary and secondary.

■ **Asking Productive Questions:** *What kind of information are you looking for? Where do you need to look for your research? How much information do you need? How timely does your research need to be?*

TYPES OF SOURCES

■ **Print Sources**

Books and Textbooks, Newspapers, Academic and Trade Journals, Government Reports and Legal Documents, Press Releases and Advertising, Flyers, Pamphlets, Leaflets.

■ **Digital and Electronic Sources**

Multimedia, Websites, Blogs and personal websites, Social media pages and message boards

EVALUATING SOURCES: INTRODUCTION

- Evaluating sources means recognizing whether the information you read and include in your research is credible. Despite the large amount of information available, both in print and online, not all of it is valid, useful, or accurate. Evaluating sources of information that you might include in your writing is an important step in any research process.
- When writing research papers, not only will you be searching for information, but you will be evaluating the sources for credibility. You must decide where to look, how to recognize credible sources, and how to cross-check your information. Learning how to evaluate effectively is a skill you need both for your course papers and for your life.

EVALUATING SOURCES

It's difficult to evaluate a source if you're not sure where to begin.

Before getting started, it's important to establish what genre of research you need.

Below is a breakdown of how sources are often separated. Once you recognize the differences in sources, it becomes easier to locate exactly what you need and evaluate whether the sources you find seem credible.

- Scholarly vs. Popular Sources
- Primary vs. Secondary Sources

SCHOLARLY VS. POPULAR SOURCES

- Most sources fall into two categories: **scholarly and popular**.
- **Scholarly sources** are written by highly-qualified researchers and have a thorough publication process, which usually involves peer-reviewing and an extensive list of references at the end of the text. Scholarly sources often have a specific audience in mind, most likely other experts in the field of study. Examples of scholarly sources include books and academic journals written by scholars and experts.
- **Popular sources**, on the other hand, are written by and intended for a general audience. Popular sources are not peer-reviewed, and they do not usually include a reference list. Examples of popular sources range from some books and magazines to websites and blogs.

If you're unsure whether the source you're reading is scholarly or popular, ask yourself these questions:

- Who is the intended audience?
- Does the author have credentials?
- Is the text peer-reviewed?
- Is there a reference list or Works Cited page?
- If the source you're examining fits the above criteria, it is most likely a scholarly source.

PRIMARY VS. SECONDARY SOURCES

- Just as sources can be scholarly or popular, sources are also divided into primary and secondary.
- **A primary source** is a firsthand or eyewitness account of information by an individual close to the topic. Examples of primary sources include autobiographies, personal correspondence (e.g., diary entries, letters), government documents, works of art and literature, statistics and data, and newspaper articles written by reporters close to the source. Today, even some social media posts are considered primary sources, because they are firsthand accounts of information.
- **A secondary source** is a source that is more removed from an event, usually written after the event has happened. Examples of secondary sources include biographies, interpretation of statistics and data, and anything written after an historical event or analyzing something that already happened (e.g., examining a work of art from 100 years ago).

PRIMARY RESEARCH

- Primary research is any type of research that you collect yourself. Examples include surveys, interviews, observations, and ethnographic research.
- **Interviews:** Interviews are one-on-one or small group question and answer sessions. Interviews will provide a lot of information from a small number of people and are useful when you want to get an expert or knowledgeable opinion on a subject.
- **Surveys:** Surveys are a form of questioning that is more rigid than interviews and that involve larger groups of people. Surveys will provide a limited amount of information from a large group of people and are useful when you want to learn what a larger population thinks.
- **Observations:** Observations involve taking organized notes about occurrences in the world. Observations provide you insight about specific people, events, or locales and are useful when you want to learn more about an event without the biased viewpoint of an interview.
- **Analysis:** Analysis involves collecting data and organizing it in some fashion based on criteria you develop. They are useful when you want to find some trend or pattern. A type of analysis would be to record commercials on three major television networks and analyze gender roles.

EVALUATING SOURCES: GENERAL GUIDELINES

Once you have an idea of the types of sources you need for your research, you can spend time evaluating individual sources. If a bibliographic citation seems promising, it's a good idea to spend a bit more time with the source before you determine its credibility. Below are some questions to ask and things to consider as you read through a source.

Find Out What You Can about the Author : One of the first steps in evaluating a source is to locate more information about the author. Sometimes simply typing an author's name into a search engine will give you an initial springboard for information. Finding the author's educational background and areas of expertise will help determine whether the author has experience in what they're writing about.

Read the Introduction / Preface: Begin by reading the Introduction or the Preface—What does the author want to accomplish? Browse through the Table of Contents and the Index. This will give you an overview of the source. Is your topic covered in enough depth to be helpful? If you don't find your topic discussed, try searching for some synonyms in the Index.

If your source does not contain any of these elements, consider reading the first few paragraphs of the source and determining whether it includes enough information on your topic for it to be relevant.

EVALUATING SOURCES: GENERAL GUIDELINES

Determine whether the Information is Fact, Opinion, or Propaganda - Information can usually be divided into three categories: *fact*, *opinion*, and *propaganda*.

- Facts are objective, while opinions and propaganda are subjective.
- A fact is something that is known to be true.
- An opinion gives the thoughts of a particular individual or group.
- Propaganda is the (usually biased) spreading of information for a specific person, group, event, or cause. Propaganda often relies on slogans or emotionally-charged images to influence an audience. It can also involve the selective reporting of true information in order to deceive an audience.
- **Identify the Language Used:** Is the language objective or emotional? Objective language sticks to the facts, but emotional language relies on garnering an emotional response from the reader. Objective language is more commonly found in fact-based sources, while emotional language is more likely to be found in opinion-based sources and propaganda.

EVALUATING SOURCES: GENERAL GUIDELINES

Evaluate the Evidence Listed

- The deeper you get into your topic, the more comprehensive your research will need to be. If you're reading an opinion-based source, ask yourself whether there's enough evidence to back up the opinions. If you're reading a fact-based source, be sure that it doesn't oversimplify the topic.

Cross-Check the Information

- When you verify the information in one source with information you find in another source, this is called cross-referencing or cross-checking. If the author lists specific dates or facts, can you find that same information somewhere else? Having information listed in more than one place increases its credibility.

Check the Timeliness of the Source

- How timely is the source? Is the source twenty years out of date? Some information becomes dated when new research is available, but other older sources of information can still be useful and reliable fifty or a hundred years later.

Examine the List of References

- Check for a list of references or other citations that look as if they will lead you to related material that would be good sources. If a source has a list of references, it often means that the source is well-researched and thorough.

EVALUATING BIBLIOGRAPHIC CITATIONS

A bibliographic citation provides relevant information about the author and publication as well as a short summary of the text, usually known as the abstract. Depending on where you find your information, the bibliographic citation will vary.

- Before you spend a lot of time reading a source, begin by looking at the following information in the citation to evaluate whether it's worth pursuing.
- Consider the author, the title of the work, the summary, where it is (e.g., a book, an academic journal, a blog, a social media site), and the timeliness of the entry. You may also want to look at the keywords to see what other categories the work falls into. Evaluate this information to see if it is relevant and valid for your research.

EVALUATING BIBLIOGRAPHIC CITATIONS

- **Library Catalog** : When searching for sources in a library catalog, the bibliographic citation will often include the author, the publisher, and the physical location of the source in the library. Using a library catalog is helpful if you are looking for print sources for your research.
- **Online Databases** : When searching for information in online databases you will most likely find a bibliographic citation entry beneath the title of the source.
- **Websites**: Different websites contain different levels of bibliographic citations. Sometimes it's possible to find complete author information, while other times you may simply have a username or an author's initials. Most websites list the available author information directly under the title of the article or at the bottom of the article. Sometimes a website does not list an author. If this is the case, it's important to determine whether the website itself seems credible. If the website is associated with a print publication, or is from a well-known organization, it is probably credible. However, you should read the article to determine whether the information seems valid.