



Using Sources Effectively

Whether you're paraphrasing or quoting directly from a source, you must always cite your source using a standard citation style. Please note that different fields and disciplines use different citation styles, clarify with your class instructor what style is required for all assignments. The examples presented in this handout are in APA style for consistency. For detailed information about APA, MLA, Chicago, and other citation styles, please visit the Student Success Centre Resources page.

Using Sources in Different Fields

Sciences

Generally, you should cite sources without mentioning them explicitly as part of your sentences while still providing a citation. In both sciences and social sciences, writers typically rely heavily on simple citations when reviewing previous research on a topic (a literature review).

Example:

Research into distance education has found that students generally prefer courses that include synchronous contact with other students (**Melton & Carter, 2003; Wing, 2002**).

Social Sciences

Social Science Disciplines often employ a simple citation while referring to authors or researchers explicitly within the sentence.

Examples:

Adel and Garretson (2006) note that student writers quote sources much more frequently than published academic writers, perhaps because student writers "give more weight to the words of their authoritative sources" (p. 280).

According to Adel and Garretson (2006), academic writers in humanities and social sciences refer to (and discuss) sources far more frequently than those in the sciences and engineering.

Humanities

In Humanities disciplines, such as English literature or Religious Studies, you may be expected to write papers based entirely on the literary or philosophical works you are studying (primary sources). In such cases, you may have to quote frequently from the sources as you analyze them or use passages as evidence to support your own claims. In this type of work it is useful to aim for a mix of simple citations and explicit attribution, as in the examples above.

Organizing Sources

When working on an assignment that requires you to weave sources together, you may want to consider the following factors to test out how your sources relate to each other:

Definition

Sources will use similar words but achieve different ends. It is important to define the key terms you use in your writing projects and place your definitions in relation to other works.

Length

The reader determines the importance of a source, in part, by how much you focus on it. Try to both meaningfully engage with foundational sources but also balance these sources to avoid bias.

Benefits and Drawbacks

Give credit where it's due. Be generous with your sources. Every work has flaws, but also some value. You should ensure that you don't falsely discredit a work that you include.

Gaps and Concentrations

By positioning your research and writing within the field, you can locate the gap(s) that your work will fill. You can also suggest the limits of your project by identifying a particular subsection of a theory or a methodology.

Dos and Don'ts of Organizing Sources

When you bring your sources together, try to keep the following "dos" and don'ts" in mind:

Do:

- Organize your sources into categories that reflect a connection to your research.
- Use signal phrases/reporting expressions (author + verb) and demonstrate the "conversation".
- Address contested territory in the field.
- Focus on how the literature ties into your work, rather than making it comprehensive (including everything)

Don't

- Give a sequential summary of articles.
- Have one paragraph per source.
- Include irrelevant material.

Types of Sources

Primary sources are documents that are not analysed or interpreted. They are accounts from individuals in a particular time period. They can include artwork, literature, and other cultural objects.

Secondary sources are based on primary sources and data. They feature analysis or interpretation. Most journal articles and scholarly books are examples of secondary sources.

Tertiary sources are three steps removed from the primary sources. Tertiary sources typically summarize and re-present current secondary sources. Tertiary sources are often dictionaries and encyclopaedias. These are great starting points for research but tend not to be used in the final products, as they are too broad and general.

Evaluating Sources

The C.R.A.P. Test

This simple acronym is helpful when thinking about broad categories of evaluation. When evaluating sources consider the following factors, represented by the letters C.R.A.P.

Currency

With scholarship on topics developing rapidly, consider how current your source is. Also consider the nature of the source. For instance, books take longer to write and publish than journal articles.

Reliability

By looking at the content used by the source, you can evaluate if the source is relevant to your project. Consider also how the source makes use of the content. For instance, is it consistent with other sources? If not, why?

Authority

Are the authors of the source in positions that would legitimize their work? Consider the following questions: Are the authors academic, or specialists in the area of study? Have these authors often written about the subject? Is the source peer-reviewed? Also, consider that a general interest source written by an academic can often be a gateway to scholarly articles.

Purpose

What is the purpose of the source? For instance, was author's the goal to inform, convince, or sell? How does this purpose inform how you treat the source?

Scholarly Sources

The word “scholarly” is often used to explain sources that have been peer-reviewed. This means that scholarly sources are books, book chapters, or articles in journals that have referees in a specialized area review the work and determine its importance, validity and quality. Many books and articles are submitted to academic publishers, but not all meet publication criteria.

Identifying Scholarly Sources

Here are a few considerations when looking for scholarly sources to include in your papers.

Databases aren’t perfect.

Even if you have selected peer-reviewed journal articles in the database search engine, you are likely to find sources that aren’t peer-reviewed included in your search results. These sources include conference proceedings, dissertations and theses, book reviews, trade magazines, and introductions.

Familiarize yourself with scholarly journals in your field.

Having “journal” in its title doesn’t necessarily make it scholarly. The Wall Street Journal is a newspaper. The Journal of Accountancy is a trade publication for Certified Public Accountants.

If it lacks sources, it is probably not scholarly.

Scholarly articles tend to have extensive citations and lengthy bibliographies. If a work has few sources listed or no bibliography it is likely not a scholarly source.

When in doubt—check!

If you are not sure if an article is a peer-reviewed source, go to the journal’s site and see who publishes it. Look for a scholarly press or an academic organization.

Source Issues

Consider these key issues when working with different types of sources.

Primary sources:

- Though the primary sources are created by those with first-hand experience of events and situations, this does not mean that they are objective! Examine sources for bias, which may originate from the social or cultural norms of the time, the position of the author, and other contextual factors.
- When possible, consider using multiple primary sources instead of just one. This allows you to compare and better evaluate the sources.
- Depending on the origin of the material, you may need to consider the impact of translations and transcription. Often, editions and translations change over time to reflect changes in scholarship. If you are working with a translated source, it can be

useful to compare different translations— particularly if you are engaging in literary analysis of key passages.

Material produced by organizations and corporations

- Organizations' and corporations' websites are often used as a source of information. However, much of what is presented on these sites is tied to the goals of these institutions. Though one needs to be vigilant with all materials, it is particularly important to scrutinize source material which likely reflect particular institutional biases.
- When working with source material that is created by organizations and corporations, consider what kind of support or information is used to back their claims? Consider cross-checking information provided with other independent organizations and reviews.

Popular materials (film, television, and artefacts of popular culture)

- Consider how academics in your field would view this source. If in doubt, ask your instructor.
- Focus on one source, rather than selecting numerous examples.
- Don't limit your engagement with the sources to repeating the plot or describing what happened in the source.

Government documents and reports

- Consider the value of the source for your paper.
- Look for longer multi-page reports that include citations instead of brief webpages. These sources are much richer and often summarize much of the current literature in the area. Avoid using press releases in your papers.
- Rather than just looking at a policy, look for the policy briefs and reports. These briefs often explain implications and issues that were important to the policy's development.
- Consider the relationship between the level of government and the topic. Documents that are more specific to the region and governance of a particular issue tend to be more valuable than broad international policies that could affect a local context.

Works Consulted

Heard Libraries, Vanderbilt University (2024) "Tips for Evaluating Sources", retrieved 15 Jan. 2025 from https://researchguides.library.vanderbilt.edu/PBDY_test.

Stauffer Library, Queen's University (2024) "Distinguishing Scholarly Journals from Other Periodicals" retrieved 15 Jan. 2025 from <https://guides.library.queensu.ca/introduction-research/evaluating-sources/non-scholarly>.