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Finding Reliable Sources

There are three reasons for finding sources for your research paper:

1. To provide yourself with background information on your topic
2. To support your own argument or findings
3. To provide a counterpoint to your own argument or findings

Six questions to ask about sources: who, what, when, where, why, and how

With these three reasons in mind, it is important that you find sources that you can reliably use to construct your paper. For every source that you find, ask yourself these six questions:

- **WHO** is the author? What makes him or her qualified to speak about this topic? What else has this author put out? Do you notice this author's name referred to in other sources, suggesting that the author is influential in the field? You may need to do a bit of Internet research to find out more about the author.

- **WHAT** does *their* list of references look like? Authors of reliable sources will take the time to include a properly formatted, thorough list of references. Look at the quantity of sources they cite, but also investigate the quality of those sources: how reliable are *those* sources? A source whose entire argument is based on unreliable sources is itself unreliable.

- **WHEN** was the source created? In general, more recent sources are more reliable, particularly in rapidly-evolving fields such as most sciences. However, in other fields, such as the humanities, the oldest sources may be most authoritative. Consider what field you are writing in and whether it would be risky to use older information.

- **WHERE** did you find the source? Does the source appear in a medium that "feels" academic, such as an online journal database or a college library? Or does it appear in a medium that "feels" non-academic, such as Facebook or a website with a lot of advertisements and flashing lights?

- **WHY** was the source created? What is the author's purpose? Is the author trying to inform an audience about factual information? Is the author trying to persuade an audience to agree with him or her? Is the author simply trying to entertain an audience? Make sure the author's purpose aligns with your own purpose.

- **HOW** is the source relevant to your topic? Only choose sources that you will actually be able to use. Do not force yourself to use a source simply because you need to meet a certain number of sources—your readers will be able to tell.

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Examples of common sources

Here are some of the most common sources writers use and how reliable they tend to be:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles. RELIABLE. These articles are written, reviewed, and published by scholars in the field, so you know that their information is accurate (unless it is outdated).

- Almanacs. RELIABLE. As long as these are not outdated, you can rely on them to contain accurate information. Keep in mind, however, that they are usually only useful for gathering information; they will probably not feature argumentation.

- Newspaper articles. RELIABLE. Newspapers are good for supplying you with background information on your topic; however, like almanacs, newspaper articles are supposed to be written objectively and will probably not contain argumentation. The "editorial" section of the newspaper may contain useful argumentation, but, as always, make sure the author is qualified.

- Books. SOMETIMES RELIABLE. Not all books are reliable; remember to check the book against your six questions.

- Websites. SOMETIMES RELIABLE. Again, check the source against your six questions. In addition, you can usually quickly determine a website's reliability by investigating:

  -whether there is an "about us" page that describes the author's (or authors') qualifications and experiences
  -how well organized the website is; reliable websites tend to be better organized
  -how many advertisements the website has; unreliable websites are often run for a commercial rather than informative purpose and therefore depend on ad revenue

  Additionally, .gov websites can be good sources for finding empirical data (such as census results, voter turnout, etc.).

- Interviews. SOMETIMES RELIABLE. The WHO question is especially important here: you want to be sure that the person you are interviewing is a reliable authority on your topic. Ask yourself: would I trust this person to give me accurate information?

- Magazine articles. UNRELIABLE. Since most magazine articles are written to entertain, they are unlikely to align with the purpose of your research. If a magazine article cites another source, however, you may wish to investigate that source.

- Online encyclopedias. UNRELIABLE. These can be helpful for getting a basic overview of your topic before you begin your research, but since the articles in online encyclopedias can be edited by anyone, you should never use them as sources. Instead,

- scroll down to the "References" section at the bottom of the article and consider using some of those sources instead.

- Articles authored by freelance writers. UNRELIABLE. Freelance writers usually get paid by the *quantity* of their work, not the *quality*. Therefore, they have little incentive to produce factual, accurate information. Even if the author claims to have impressive credentials, you are better off using journal articles, which you know are reliable.