

Using Sources Effectively: Overview

Whether you're paraphrasing or quoting directly from a source, you must ALWAYS cite your source using a standard citation style. The examples presented here are in APA style. For detailed information about APA, MLA, and other citation styles, please visit the Student Success Centre Resource 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 citation when reviewing previous research on a topic (a literature review).

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

Social sciences

While you will use a simple citation, most often you should try to refer to the writers or researchers explicitly within the sentence.

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 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. 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 schemas to test out how your sources relate to each other.

Definition	Sources will use similar words, but achieve different ends. A literature review is an opportunity to define the key terms and place your definition 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 & 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 & Concentrations	Because a literature review is a purpose-driven document, you can use it to highlight a gap in the current literature. By positioning yourself within the field, you can locate the gap 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.

When you bring the sources together, try to keep in mind the following “do”s and “don’t”s

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Organize your sources into categories that reflect a connection to your research.• Use 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Give a sequential summary of articles.• Have one paragraph per source.• Include irrelevant material.

Evaluating Sources

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

Secondary sources are based on primary sources and data. They feature analysis or interpretation. Most journal articles 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.

The CRAP Test

This simple acronym is helpful when thinking about broad categories of evaluation.	
Currency	With scholarship on topics developing quickly, consider how current your source is? 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. Is it consistent with other sources?
Authority	Are the authors academics or in positions that would legitimize their work? Have these authors often written about the subject? Consider that a non-scholarly source by a professor can often be a gateway to scholarly articles.
Purpose:	Was the goal to inform, convince, or sell? How does this purpose inform how you treat the source?

For more information about the CRAP test and its application to web-based sources, visit: Peabody Library Learning Commons, Vanderbilt University (n.d.) *What the C.R.A.P.?* retrieved May 9, 2012 from http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/visions/CRAP_VUceptor_Guide.pdf

Scholarly Sources

The word “scholarly” is often used to explain sources that have been peer-reviewed. This means that scholarly sources are articles in journals that have referees in a specialized area review the work and determine its importance, validity and quality. Many articles are submitted, a small percentage of which are published.

Identifying Scholarly Sources

- **Databases aren't perfect.** Even if you have selected peer-reviewed journal articles in the database search engine, you are likely to get a number of sources that aren't peer-reviewed. These non-scholarly sources include conference proceedings, dissertations and theses, book reviews, trade magazines, and introductions.
- Having the word **journal in its title** doesn't 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.
- **Solution:** Go to the journal's site and see who publishes it. Look for a scholarly press or an academic organization.

Consider these key issues when working with the following sources:

Primary Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Though the primary sources are created by those with first-hand experience of events and situations, they are unlikely to be completely objective. Make sure to look for bias, which may originate from the social or cultural norms of the time, the position of the author, and other contextual factors. • Consider using a series of primary sources rather than only one. This allows you to compare and evaluate the selection of 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.
Organizations' & Corporations' Websites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Though one needs to be vigilant with all materials, organizations' and corporations' websites are often used as a source of factual information. However, much of what is presented on these sites is tied to the goals of these institutions. • What kind of support or information is used to support their claims? Consider cross-checking information with other independent organizations and reviews?
Popular Materials (Film, Television, and Artefacts of Popular Culture)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 repeat the plot of the source or describe what happened.
Government Documents and Reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid the CIA World Factbook and Statistics Canada. These sources tend to be overused. 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 the 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.

For more information about identifying scholarly sources, visit: Stauffer Library, Queen's University (2009) *Distinguishing Scholarly Journals from Other Periodicals* retrieved May 9th, 2012 from <http://library.queensu.ca/inforef/tutorials/qcat/qeval.htm>