

Using good sources: evaluating what you find

Your sources form the foundation of your argument, just like the foundations of a house. If you don't have a good foundation, it causes problems. Using bad sources means your arguments aren't well supported and your assignment won't turn out well. There are two basic criteria to use when evaluating your sources.

Criteria 1: Scholarly or Authoritative

The first is that the sources should be authoritative, which often means scholarly or peer-reviewed. Nearly all of your assignments require you to use authoritative or scholarly sources, whether they say so or not.

In Arts and Science majors, you're expected to use scholarly or peer-reviewed sources. These are written by people affiliated with a university. They usually include an abstract or summary of the article. The content consists of original research done by the authors, gives the method for the research study, and discusses the results or findings of the study. There are many references to other sources given in a bibliography or list of references.

Authoritative sources aren't always scholarly articles. In Business for example, they might be statistics or reports provided by major agencies or government bodies, like the Bank of Canada, Industry Canada, or Statistics Canada. These would be considered authoritative, and therefore a good source for assignments.

You'll find lots of other information out there that isn't scholarly or authoritative. This includes blogs, social media, newspapers, magazines like Macleans, online sites like Wikipedia, and in fact most web sites.

Normally, you wouldn't use information that isn't authoritative or scholarly unless your instructions say you should. One exception is if you use the information as an example, or a primary source. Primary sources are sources that you do analysis on yourself. For example, you could look at news articles about female athletes, analyze them, and come up with an argument about how newspapers depict female athletes. Normally though you'd still support your findings with what others have written about in scholarly articles.

The easiest way to find good information is to use the Library's web site. You can search for scholarly information in Omni, the Library's catalogue. Also check out the Subject guide for your subject, located in the Research menu, for links to other search tools that are more specialized for your topic area.

When you search Library databases for scholarly sources, not all the information you find will be scholarly. Make sure you limit to peer-reviewed sources when you search. Library databases normally have a 'peer-reviewed' check box when you search, or an option to limit to peer-reviewed results after you search.

Criteria 2: Relevance

The second main criteria for evaluating your sources is relevance. You need to make sure your sources are relevant to your topic.

Often you find a lot of information on your topic, and it's easy to assume most of it is relevant. In reality, though, only a few of the sources out there on your topic are actually relevant to your paper. How can you tell which ones those are?

One of the easiest ways is to turn your topic into a question. For example, say your topic is female athletes in the media. Pose your topic as a question, like "How are female athletes portrayed in the media?" This is called a research question, and helps you focus your research more effectively.

When you are looking for sources, you need to find things that help you answer your research question. This will help you easily weed out lots of things that might be on your topic, but aren't necessarily helpful for answering the specific question you are researching. When you do a search and get lots of results, this makes it easier to evaluate which ones will be relevant.

Focusing your research around a question, and using that question to help identify the relevant sources, will help make your research and reading more efficient. You know what you are looking for, so you will save time when you are searching. You will also end up with sources that will help build a good foundation for your assignment.

Questions & Feedback

If you have any questions, ask us at library.wlu.ca/help/askus.