

# Using good sources: evaluating what you find

Your sources are the foundation that supports your argument, just like foundations hold up a house. You need a good solid foundation. Using bad sources weakens your arguments and your paper. There are two basic criteria to use when evaluating whether sources are good ones.

## 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 most cases you are expected to use scholarly or peer-reviewed sources. These are written by university researchers, and reviewed by knowledgeable peer scholars to ensure quality. Scholarly articles typically:

- are original research done by the authors
- state how the research was done (methodology)
- discusses the results or findings
- contain many references to other scholarly sources

Authoritative sources are not always peer-reviewed. In Business for example, they may be statistics or reports by major agencies or government bodies, like the Bank of 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 social media, AI tools, newspapers, magazines, web 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 you do analysis on yourself. If you do this, you still need to support your analysis with scholarly or authoritative sources.

The most reliable way to find good information is to use the Library's web site. Search for scholarly information in Omni, the Library's catalogue, in the middle of the main Library web page. 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.

Sources you find are not all scholarly. Limit to Peer-reviewed sources when you search. Look for the 'peer-reviewed' checkbox on the search or the results page. This limit is not perfect but nearly all your results will be peer-reviewed or scholarly.

## 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, but in reality only a few of the sources 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, if your topic is female athletes in the media, pose it 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 answer the research question you created. This will help you weed out things that are on your topic, but aren't useful for answering your specific question. When looking through lots of results, this makes it easier to evaluate which ones will be relevant.

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

## Questions

If you have any questions, ask us at [library.wlu.ca/help/askus](https://library.wlu.ca/help/askus).