

Finding and Evaluating Sources

When approaching a project that involves research, first be sure you understand your **professor's requirements or expectations**. Some professors may ask you to include a book or require you to use your textbook. Some may want you to only use the library databases or may limit you to scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. Others may allow you to use internet sources but only from reliable sites. How should you navigate all these types of sources? Let's look at some information that will help you choose the best sources for your particular project.

Source type	Description	How to Locate	Examples
Books: Print or Electronic	Longer published works	Library catalog	<i>Women in the American Civil War</i> by Lisa Tendrich Frank
Scholarly, peer-reviewed articles	Articles in academic journals, specific to a field of study, often reporting results of research associated with universities. Considered very reliable.	Library databases but must check the scholarly/peer-reviewed box during search	"Ideology and Migration After the American Civil War," by Shari Eli, Laura Salisbury, and Alison Shertzer in <i>The Journal of Economic History</i> , vol. 78, no. 3, Sept 2018
Trade publications	Articles published on a regular basis, usually by organizations or associations, specific to a field. Reliability is high.	Library databases, general internet searches	"Every Sketch Tells a Story" by Gary W. Gallagher in <i>Civil War Times</i> , Oct 2018.
Popular Magazines & Newspapers	Articles intended for a wider audience (even if specific to certain interests) from commercial publishers. Must be evaluated for reliability	Library databases (for some publications); general internet searches	"Buffalo Soldier Secretly Was a She," by Daniel P. Bolger in <i>Army Magazine</i> , Sept 2018.
Websites	Internet only sites with a wide variety of reliability depending on the publisher	Internet searches	<i>Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database</i> , sponsored by the National Park Service, nps.gov

Using the Library Databases

The databases contain reliable sources in a variety of types, such as e-books, scholarly articles, trade publications, newspapers, historical archives, and videos.

- For most topics, start by searching a more general database, such as Academic Search Complete or JSTOR.
- Look through the various database names to see if there are some more pertinent to your topic than others. Many are specialized in various fields like history or medicine, while some contain certain types of sources, such as biographies or statistics.
- Click the “Full Text” box to access whole articles rather than just abstracts. (Articles not available in full text may be requested through Interlibrary Loan [ILL]; be aware that articles requested through ILL may take a few days to be delivered to you.)
- You can specify a date range if the article must be from a particular time period or be very current.
- If your assignment requires “scholarly” sources, you will need to click the “scholarly” or “peer-reviewed” box in the search (these terms are interchangeable).
- Play around with using different search terms to yield more, less or different results.
- Many articles contain abstracts so you can decide the relevance without reading the article. If no abstract is given, try reading the first couple of paragraphs and the last couple of paragraphs to get a general idea of main points in the article.
- Avoid using book reviews. Most instructors would not consider this a legitimate source. However, they may lead you to an actual book that is helpful.

Searching the Internet

Wikipedia: Although Wikipedia is not considered reliable and should not be used within your paper, it can provide a good overview of a topic, provide ideas for narrowing down the scope, and lead you to reliable sources through its reference list. If you do not know much about the topic, it can be a good place to start.

Google: Try a variety of search terms. Realize that many of these sources would not be considered reliable. Avoid blog posts or websites operated by one individual. On the Settings tab at the Google search screen, you can choose Advanced Search to narrow your results based on certain parameters.

Evaluating the Sources

Once you have generated lists of possible sources, evaluate them for relevance and reliability.

Relevance: Is the material directly related to your narrowed topic? Does it contribute anything of value to supporting your thesis? Does it confirm or conflict with other sources? How can you resolve any conflicts? Is it too complicated or technical to be useful? Did you find the best sources or just settle for ones that could “work”?

Reliability: Consider both author(s) and publisher or sponsor and their credibility. What is the authors' education or experience (may require some searching)? Does the author seem biased or use any logical fallacies or overly emotional language? Is the publication reputable? Is the material subject to an editorial process? Is it scholarly or peer-reviewed? Can the information be verified? Are citations provided? If not, are the sources for their information clearly and specifically identified within the wording of the text? Is the information provided current? Does the presentation of the site seem professional?