

CM107 Unit 7 Reading

You probably do a little bit of research every day, whether it is going online to find out what this weekend's weather is going to be like, or finding a chocolate cake recipe for your child's birthday, or searching for resources to pay for your college education. You no doubt also conduct research at work, whether it is finding out what competing businesses are doing or locating information on a recent development in your field of expertise.

The Reading in this unit will show you how to locate the most relevant and reliable information available to help you effectively integrate that information into the documents you are writing. This information will also show you how to complete the following steps of the research process successfully:

- Solidify Your Topic
- Plan Your Strategy
- Evaluate Your Sources
- Use Your Sources

In addition, the Reading in this unit will prepare you for the next unit of the course, in which you learn to complete the last step in the research process: citing your sources.

The Importance of Research

Research can be an intimidating but rewarding process. It allows you to gain additional knowledge on a topic, assemble outside support, and provide credibility for your assertions.

Creating an academic essay can be divided into three main steps: finding sources, evaluating sources, and integrating sources. This section will provide instruction on each of these steps, along with additional links and information to guide you through the research process.

Determine the Role of Research in Your Writing

Depending upon the purpose of the assignment, research can be used to accomplish many things.

Whether you are writing to inform, persuade, or critique, research should be used in conjunction with your own ideas to support your thesis and your purpose. Do not let the research speak for itself. You, the writer of the document, are the most important voice. You are using outside sources to support your thesis. Therefore, let your comments, connections, objections, etc. play the strongest role in your paper. When you quote or paraphrase an outside source, always bring the paper back to your thoughts.

It is essential to use outside sources that are going to back up your argument. In many cases, researching will reveal evidence that might relate to the topic but does not support your side of the argument. Many assignments will ask you to acknowledge the

other side of the argument, so be sure to research your topic thoroughly and from many angles.

For some assignments, outside research may not be necessary. Thus, in determining the necessary amount of research needed, first evaluate the topic of the assignment. For example, a paper that is based solely on one's opinion will likely require much less research than one that covers a highly scientific subject. To be sure, always ask your instructor for specific instructions.

Finding Scholarly Sources

Before you begin your search, it is important to know that sources are divided into two categories: primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include original documents created by an author or group of authors such as historical documents, literary works, or lab reports. They also include any field research you conduct on your own such as interviews, experiments, or surveys. Secondary sources are sources written about primary sources and include scholarly books and articles, reviews, biographies, and textbooks.

Most often in academic writing, you will want to consult scholarly secondary sources along with any primary sources available. A scholarly source would be one that has been written by a professional in the field; the person may hold a doctoral degree or have a great amount of expertise in the field you are studying. Oftentimes, an author's credentials will be listed as a footnote within the source, but if not, an Internet search may reveal whether the writer can be determined to be a scholarly author or one that has done a vast amount of research on the topic. The author of the source will always be an important consideration, as your view of the quality of the article may change depending upon the author's credibility. In addition, you must ask yourself whether your source is scholarly.

In many fields, there will be a number of academic journals or publications that deal with publishing scholarly articles related to the subject. By discovering and accessing these journals, you can be sure that the piece from which you are quoting is a scholarly source. Many universities pay fees in order to provide their students with access to these journals in their electronic form, and an even greater number of university libraries will shelve current and back issues of these journals.

Furthermore, conducting an Internet search of these journals and articles may prove fruitful. Search engines such as Google offer the option of searching "Google Scholar" in order to access only these scholarly articles. Finding these sources online, depending on the journal and the site, may require that you pay a fee to view the article. This is where university libraries come in handy, as they offer free access to the same materials.

Evaluating Scholarly Sources

Now that you have found your sources, you must evaluate them. Evaluating sources becomes a major component of researching because the materials chosen will reflect upon *your* reputation. Aside from being able to find informative sources, a good researcher is also able to quickly assess the credibility of information. Through practice, this skill will come.

When setting out to write a research paper, there is a vast pool of information available, including books, newspapers, periodicals, reference works, and government documents.

Included in this can be your own empirical data, obtained in interviews and surveys, but you will probably not need to use it all. As important as it is to be able to find sources specific to your topic, it is equally vital to be able to correctly assess each source's credibility -- that is, how trustworthy, accurate, and verifiable the sources are. Due to the vast amount of information available on the Internet, it presents an especially interesting challenge in determining the credibility of sources. However, even when evaluating print sources, the same criticism should be maintained.

You must also be aware of the author's possible bias. Even the most credible sources may exhibit forms of bias, as most authors' past experiences will come into play. Bias is most likely to occur in controversial topics such as politics or religion, but is still likely to be present whenever an opinion is voiced. The author's beliefs and experiences can thus affect the objectivity of the text. Another case may be when the author or publisher has ties to a special interest group that may allow him or her to see only one side of the issue. Lastly, make sure to evaluate how fairly the author treats the opposing viewpoints. Complete objectivity is very difficult to attain in writing, but try to find sources that are not incredibly subjective. Nonetheless, the most important thing is simply to be aware of possible biases so that you are not misled.

Here are four approaches to assessing the credibility of the sources you find.

Checklist for Evaluating Print Sources

The fact that it's in print doesn't automatically make it a reliable source. When evaluating print sources ask yourself these questions:

Checklist for Evaluating a Book

- **How old is it?** Research projects will have different requirements as to how old your sources can be. For example, when dealing with contemporary issues or a current controversy, using outdated sources will likely provide inaccurate information. For example, a book on euthanasia published in 1978 probably isn't the best choice. While the book may contain useful information for other projects, it does not make sense to use it when there are more current materials available.
- **Who is the publisher?** Books published by a university press undergo significant editing and review to increase their validity and accuracy. When assessing a book published by a commercial publisher, be aware of vanity presses (companies that authors pay to publish their works, rather than vice versa). Also be cautious about using books labeled as "self-published" or books that are published by specific organizations (such as a corporation or a nonprofit group).
- **Is the author objective?** Check biographical information included in the book, as well as other sources, to gather information about the author's background as a way of determining his or her stance on a particular issue. In addition, find out about his or her previous works, past professional experience, affiliations with groups or movements, current employment, and degrees or other credentials.

Checklist for Evaluating Periodicals

- **Is it a scholarly journal or a magazine?** Scholarly journals are almost always characterized by no advertisements, longer articles, and the requirement that

authors cite the sources they use in writing their articles. Articles submitted to scholarly journals undergo substantial scrutiny by other professionals as a way to increase the clarity and accuracy of the information contained in them. Most scholarly journals are not sold on news-stands, but rather are circulated primarily among the academic community. In contrast, magazines are available for purchase; they tend to contain shorter articles, generally don't require writers to cite their sources, and contain advertising. Therefore, while magazines may contain relevant information, the content may not always be entirely accurate.

- **How old is it?** As noted above, dated material can sometimes be inaccurate. Always ask your instructor if you're uncertain about how old is too old.
- **Newspaper article: What do you know about the paper that publishes it?** Some newspapers have a discernible political slant, which can often be found by skimming through the headlines or by seeing how others regard the newspaper. For example, *The Los Angeles Times* is considered a more progressive news source, while its neighbor *The Orange County Register* is considered to have a libertarian slant.

Checklist for Evaluating Web Sources

For most academic research, teachers will require that students use scholarly sources. For this there are a number of “academic databases” that will always provide credible sources. These sites generally require some form of a subscription in order to access them; however, many colleges provide complimentary access to students. Once logged into the site, users are able to search and sort the articles by criterion such as date, subject, author, and more importantly, whether or not they have been peer reviewed and are scholarly. Examples of these sites include, but are not limited to: EBSCO, JSTOR, and Proquest. Links to these “gated websites” can generally be found on your school's web page. Nevertheless, always ask what databases are available to you as a student.

While the rest of the Internet has a wide range of easily accessible and useful information, discretion must be maintained. Because anyone can put information on the Internet, make it your first priority to know who is behind the sites you find. Individuals? Nonprofit groups? Corporations? Academics? Advocacy groups? Federal, state, or local government? Small businesses or single vendors? Depending on your topic, you may want to avoid dot-com web sites; for many, their primary purpose is commerce, and that can significantly affect what they publish. Of course, other websites can also have agendas. This can lead to false or misleading information. Therefore, it is best to consult a number of sources so that those with agendas will stand out.

Ask yourself:

- **By whom was the website created?** Be cautious if there is no author. Try looking for "about this site" or check the homepage. Does the website discuss the qualifications of the author(s)? Does it give contact information such as an email address or telephone number?
- **By whom is the website sponsored?** Determine whether the website is sponsored by a special interest group. By learning about the affiliated groups, much can be ascertained about the credibility of the author and web site. Also look at the domain

name. This will tell you by whom the site is sponsored. For example: educational (.edu), commercial (.com), nonprofit (.org), military (.mil), or network (.net).

- **Is the website relevant?** Decide whether the information is something that can actually be used in the paper or, at the very least, gives a helpful background. If what is found cannot be used, move on to something else.
- **Does the website contain any errors?** Can the definitions, figures, dates, and other facts presented on the website be verified in other sources? Look for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and content errors. If there appears to be more than one or two content errors, move on.
- **Is the website relatively unbiased?** As it is noted above, carefully examining the source behind the website can lead to clues as to what kind of bias and agenda the site may contain. Once the source has been deemed valid, continue to remain alert, especially if the topic is controversial. Look for websites that discuss multiple points of view. Take note of the language used, and avoid sites that seem to exhibit characteristics of bias and/or inaccurate information.
- **Are there advertisements on the Web page?** Do these particular advertisements reflect a possible bias toward the subject matter?
- **What appears to be the website's purpose?** Think about why the site was created. Is its purpose to inform, persuade, or sell a product to the reader? For whom was the site created? Who is the intended audience? If you are not included in the intended audience, carefully consider whether or not the information is relevant to your research.
- **Is the website comprehensive.** A valuable website will cover a topic in-depth and lead to additional sources.
- **Does the website provide references?** Determine whether the references themselves are authoritative.
- **How old is the website?** A website that has remained on the Internet a long time may be better trusted than one that was added a month ago. Make sure that the information is not outdated. When was the site last updated? Credible websites will garner ongoing attention by their creators to make sure that the content is as up-to-date as possible.
- **Has the website received any awards?** Websites that have received awards may have better reputations.
- **Is the website user-friendly?** Does the website download quickly? Can you read all the text? Does any text appear too small, in strange characters, or in a font that is illegible? How easy is it to navigate through the website? Is the content accessible? The information presented should be clear, precise, and easy to understand. Avoid using sites that make use of overly scientific and/or technological terms that are difficult to understand. If it cannot be clearly understood, it may lead to misinterpretation and thus incorrect information in your work.

Consider Your Project

How you evaluate a source will differ depending on the project you're working on. When determining whether a source is credible, biased, or relevant, it is equally important to consider how the source will be used.

For example, Phillip Morris has a web site that touts the company's programs to curb smoking among young people. Obviously, information from a tobacco company and cigarette marketing giant can be considered biased. You must ask yourself whether their program is effective and whether the content of the site can be trusted and in what context.

Should you never use that source? You might want to if you were writing a paper that examined the smoking rates of 10 - 13 year olds. What role might the Phillip Morris site play in your paper? Does the site display information that contradicts the company's advertising campaigns? Would the campaign website be effective in your argument? It all depends on what side of the argument is going to be supported in your research project.

Audience. Purpose. Argument. These intents should be considered since they affect how sources should be evaluated.

Consult ADAM

When faced with assessing a large number of sources in a short period of time, the quickest way to cover the essential points is to remember this acronym:

- **Age.** How old is this source? For almost every topic, search for the most current sources that can be found.
- **Depth.** Does the source go in-depth, or does it just skim over the surface? Does it feature the many details and long discussions that are expected from academic sources, or does it just seem to cover the main ideas? Always use substantive sources.
- **Author.** Who is the author? What is known about his/her qualifications? Is he/she really an expert? Can any bias be seen? What is his/her purpose?
- **Money.** Follow the money. Is the source coming from a place that's trying to "sell" something? Is there advertising where this source appears that might affect what will be printed?