

# Using Sources

## Finding and Using Research in a Paper



Every student at college will, at some point, have to write a paper that is driven by (or at least relies on) research. This means that you will have to find information from outside sources and put that information to use in your paper. Most people probably know that using research in a paper is not as simple as copying and pasting information from Web sites, but there's actually a very straightforward process for using research in a paper. It's basically a three-step process:

1. Find the information
2. Integrate the information into the paper
3. Acknowledge where the information came from

Each of these three steps entails a considerable amount of work, which can seem intimidating if you let yourself get bogged down in the process. The most important rule to remember when using outside sources in a paper is that every cited statement you use needs to serve some purpose and be in some way relevant to the overall purpose of the paper; when you use sources in your paper, don't just use them for the sake of using them. That's an easy mistake to make, especially since most instructors have specific requirements on how many sources must be used. But it's an important thing to remember, because nothing destroys a research paper faster than a massive information dump.

## Finding the Research

The first step to using research in a paper is obviously finding the sources you're going to use. There is a very definite process to this, and taking the "quick way" while you're doing your research will ultimately lead to more work later; low-quality sources, though considerably easier to find, are more difficult to verify and cite because information about those sources is often harder to find.

Search engines like Google are good for getting a general feel for the "pulse" of the research available on a particular topic, but for finding specific sources, Google and similar sites should only be used as a last resort. In other words, if you have been assigned a research paper, Google should be the *last* place you go, not the first.

In fact, there is a very particular order of research that tends to net the most high-quality sources of information:

1. **Print resources:** These are often a good first option because they have probably had the most independent review, and they are often very easy to cite. Patrick Henry Community College has a fully equipped library with an extensive collection of print resources, along with librarians who are skilled in helping you direct your research.

2. **Database sources:** These will likely be the most common type of source you use in your paper; it has the reliability of a print source but the convenience of a Web source. Many of PHCC's research databases have citation tools, too, so citing database sources is usually simple. You can get to PHCC's research databases by clicking "Lester Library" on the "Quick Links" menu of PHCC's homepage on the Web, then clicking on "Research Databases."
3. **Wikipedia:** This is an online encyclopedia. It is *not* useful as a source in and of itself – in fact, most instructors will tell you not to use Wikipedia as a source. This is because anyone with an Internet connection can edit Wikipedia. However, even though Wikipedia is not useful as a source itself, it is a very useful research tool. Information on Wikipedia is usually cited to outside sources, so you can often find good sources simply by going through Wikipedia's reference lists and using the same sources Wikipedia uses. Additionally, many Wikipedia articles have a section of external links, which often lead to useful sources.
4. **Web sources:** These are sources found through a general Web search, such as by using Google. For most topics, you should be able to find ample sources without having to rely on these. If you must search using Google or another search engine, make sure any source you find is reliable.

### How Can I Tell If a Source Is Reliable?

One of the most important parts of doing research is making sure that the sources you find are credible and useful enough to put towards your paper. This means you need to evaluate your sources instead of simply taking its information at face value. This is important with all types of sources, but it is especially important for resources found on the Web because they tend to have the least oversight. You can tell a lot about a source just by exercising some critical thinking and asking a few questions about the source before you use it. If you find yourself unable to answer several of these questions – or if the answers are unfavorable – you should look for a different source:

- Where does your source come from?
  - What is its URL (Web address)?
  - Does it come from a research database?
  - Is it in Web page format (.html) or in Portable Document Format (.pdf)?
  - Did you find it through a search engine like Google?
- Who is responsible for your source's information?
  - Who is your source's author?
    - Is the author a person or an organization?
    - Does your source have multiple authors?
  - Does your source have an editor instead of an author?
  - Is the author qualified to discuss the topic?
    - Does the source clarify any of the author's credentials?
- What purpose does your source serve?

- Is your source trying to sell something?
- Is it trying to persuade/convince you?
- Is it providing information?
- Is it satire or parody instead of a real source?
- Is your source up to date?
  - Do you know when your source was created and/or published?
  - Has new information become available since your source was published?
    - If it has, has your source been updated accordingly?
  - If your source is online, does it suffer from “link rot” (links on the site leading to “not found” or “this page has moved” errors)?
- Is your source credible?
  - Does your source support the claims it makes?
  - Does your source give appropriate credit to any outside sources it uses?
  - Does it refrain from making emotional appeals, using loaded words, or applying contentious labels?
  - Does your source acknowledge and respond to all associated points of view?
- Is your source of good quality?
  - Are the grammar and mechanics presentable and free of obvious, glaring errors?
  - Is the Web site free of flashy advertisements and distracting pop-ups?
  - Does the source avoid using dated clip-art or distracting fonts?
  - If the source relies heavily on pictures or graphics, are its graphics appropriately captioned?

The simplest way to tell whether a source is reliable or not is to find out how easy it is to verify the information it contains – if the only information you have about a source is an article title and the Web address of the site you’re using, there is no way to tell whether that source is reliable. The more information you can find *about* your source, the more likely your source is to be reliable and useful.

## Integrating the Research

Finding sources of information is only the first part of appropriately employing resources in a research paper. The mistake that many people make in writing a research paper is in thinking that it is enough to simply drop information into the paper.

If you are using a piece of information in your paper from an outside source, you need to make sure you know *why* you are using it, and why you are using it in that specific place. Any outside information in your paper has to serve some purpose, and that purpose has to be more meaningful than, “My teacher told me to use sources,” or, “I need my paper to be at least 700 words.”

When you’re using a sourced piece of information, make sure it is

- Credible and verifiable

- Useful for your purposes
  - Just because a piece of information is *true* does not necessarily mean it is *useful*.
- Relevant to the specific point you're making
  - Research may be relevant in one part of the paper but irrelevant in another; a researched statement should be supporting some point you're making and not just standing on its own.
- Introduced, cited, and quoted appropriately
  - Anything from an outside source – even if it's been put in your own words – needs to have a source citation.
  - If you're using a direct quote, you need to introduce it and use quote marks.
- Connected to the content of the paper
  - Information from outside sources should always be accompanied by some discussion and analysis showing *how* the information supports the points you're making.

## Additional Writing Center Resources

- Citing Sources
- Wikipedia: A Quick Primer
- Internet Safety

## Further Reading

- Cornell University Digital Literacy Resource: A Guide to Online Research  
<https://digitalliteracy.cornell.edu/tutorial/dpl3000.html>
- Evaluating Internet Research Sources (by Robert Harris)  
[www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm](http://www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm)
- *The Oxford Guide to Library Research* by Thomas Mann, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (2015, Oxford University Press)
- *Extreme Searcher's Internet Handbook* by Randolph Hock, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (2013, Medford)