Using Sources
Finding and Using Research

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 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 websites, but there's actually a very straightforward process for using research in a paper. The process of using research can basically be broken down into three steps:

1. Finding the information
2. Integrating the information into the paper
3. Acknowledging 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. Even so, it's an important thing to remember, because nothing destroys a research paper faster than an aimless information dump.

Finding the Information

The first step to using research in a paper is obviously finding the sources you're going to use. There's a very definite process to this, and taking the "quick way" while you're doing your research will ultimately lead to more work later. A quick search on Google may seem like the easiest way to do research, but search engines like Google tend to consistently return low-quality sources and content promoted by advertisers rather than scholarly, credible results.

Even though low-quality sources are usually easy to find, you will do more work trying to verify the information and figure out the citations for them. When you're doing research for a research paper, search engines like Google should actually be the *last* place you go, not the first. There are many places to go that will give you better search results; your sources will not only be of higher quality, but they will also likely be more relevant and useful to your purposes than what you glean from a general internet search.

There's a particular order of research that tends to net the highest-quality results:

1. **Print resources:** These tend to be the highest quality sources because they have usually been through a rigorous process of oversight and editing. The fact that they are usually easy to cite is an added bonus. Visiting a library (whether it's the college library or a local public library) is a good way to find these sources; library staff can often help you direct your research appropriately. Remember, however, that for some topics, the *currency* of your sources is important, so make sure the print resources you use aren't outdated.
2. **Database sources:** These will likely be the most common type of source you use in your paper. Database research usually returns peer-reviewed articles from research journals, often mixed in with results from magazines, newspapers, and even e-books. They have the general reliability of print sources but the convenience of web sources. Research databases are usually accessed through the college's homepage. (At PHCC, you can access the research databases by clicking "Library" at the top of the PHCC homepage, then clicking "Research Databases.")
3. **Wikipedia:** This is an online encyclopedia. It's a general reference tool; Wikipedia is *not* useful as a source in and of itself (most instructors will even say "Don't use Wikipedia" when they talk about using sources). In point of fact, general reference encyclopedias aren't useful as sources since that's not their purpose. They are, however, useful research tools. 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 list of external links; unlike the result list from a search engine like Google, this list has been curated by actual people instead of by search algorithms.
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 have to do a web search, you need to spend plenty of time making sure the sources you find are reliable.

Evaluating Sources

Simply finding sources is not enough to apply them to a paper. Once you have found a few sources, you need to evaluate them both for their trustworthiness and for their usefulness to your purposes. A particular source, even when credible, may be useful for one purpose but not for another. For example, if you are writing a paper about vaccines, a newspaper article discussing a measles outbreak is potentially useful for discussing the consequences of the anti-vaccination movement, but if you want to discuss the effectiveness of a particular vaccine, you'll make a much stronger case using peer-reviewed studies from a medical journal. Both the newspaper article and the journal article can be *trustworthy*, but that doesn't mean that they're useful for the same things.

As for credibility, you can tell a lot about a source's trustworthiness just by exercising some critical thinking and asking a few questions about the source before you use it:

- Can you say with confidence who is responsible for the source's information?
    - Does your source make the author's name easy to find?
    - Is your source's author qualified to discuss the topic?
    - Does the source's author cite any additional sources?
- Is your source up to date for your topic?
    - Was your source published within the last few years?
    - Does the information in your source still track with newer sources that have been published since then?
- Is your source dependable?
    - Does your source support the claims it makes?
    - Does your source reference other sources and give them appropriate credit?
    - Does your source use neutral language and avoid emotional, political, and religious appeals?
- Is your source of good quality?
    - Is your source largely free of glaring grammatical errors and typos?
    - Is the source's website mostly free of flashy graphics and distracting advertisements?
    - Is your source free of dated clip-art and distracting fonts?
    - If your source relies on pictures and graphics, are they captioned appropriately?

If you find yourself answering "no" or "I don't know" to these questions, you should consider finding the same information from a better source. If you can't, it's possible (likely, in fact) that the information you're reading is simply not correct. At that point, you should reconsider your position or see if you can find a different way to support it.

Applying the Research

Finding sources of information is only the first part of employing research in a paper. You have to actually apply that research to your writing; it's not enough to just drop cited information into your paper with no context or clear line of reasoning.

Your research needs to fit into your paper. If you're using a piece of information in your paper that comes from an outside source, you need to have a *reason* for using it. It needs to serve some purpose – and that purpose needs to be more cogent than "My teacher told me to use sources" or "I need my paper to be at least 700 words." Using sources just to pad the word count or to satisfy a requirement that sources be used is not a constructive addition to your paper.

Research should merit discussion and analysis, and it needs to clearly support your main points. Remember that just because a piece of information is *true* does not necessarily

mean that it is *useful* in your paper. Integrating research into your paper might look something like this:

> According to then-FBI director James Comey, the perpetrator of the Pulse Nightclub shooting had more than likely self-radicalized online (Shabad par. 1). The importance of this becomes increasingly apparent when other shooters like Dylann Roof, thought to have similarly self-radicalized through internet propaganda, are taken into account.

In the above example, the writer used research to present the findings of the FBI director (note the parenthetical citation – anything from an outside source needs a source citation, *even if* you've put it in your own words), but that's not where the point ends. The writer then goes on to discuss why, in *his opinion*, that piece of information is important. That is *analysis* – a critical component of any research paper. Information from outside sources should always be accompanied by discussion and analysis showing how the information supports the points you're making.