

Finding and Evaluating Sources



Research is an essential part of academic work because it increases your awareness of your topic and the discussion surrounding it. This handout can help you start researching by showing you a few ways to find sources at BYU and then evaluate them.

Finding Sources

Gather Background Information

It is easier to do rigorous research if you know a little bit about the discussions surrounding your topic. This can help you understand your topic better, and it can teach you some keywords to include in your searches. Consider these approaches as you do background research:

- Do a general search about your topic through Google.
 - Open the first few pages that come up and scan them for relevant information.
 - Go to scholar.google.com and use the search engine.
- Visit the main BYU library page, click on the *Research Guides* link.
 - Then, click on the *Research Starter Guide* link. This page links to the *Gale Virtual Reference Library*, which has topic-specific encyclopedias with general information.
 - On the *Research Starter Guide* page, you can also click on *Opposing Viewpoints in Context (GALE)* to better understand both sides of current controversial topics.

Locate Specific Sources

Once you know more background information about your topic, narrow your search to include topics you could use in your thesis. Here are some ways to locate specific sources:

- Look at the bibliographies of sources you have already collected to find related sources.
- Go to the red *Research Guides* box on the library homepage:
 - On this page, click on the subject guide most relevant to your topic.
 - Though each guide varies according to the subject, guides will have tabs (e.g., *Finding Articles*, *Reference Sources*, or *Databases*) to direct you. Click on relevant tabs to find the search engines, databases, or journals recommended by the subject librarian for that area.
 - You can then use the journal or database's general or advanced search to find sources.
- Go to the *Articles* box on the library homepage and do a general or advanced search for your topic.
- Go to the green *Databases* box on the library homepage:
 - Click on the link to individual databases.
 - Enter your topic in the search bar and click on the magnifying glass to search.

Evaluating Sources

Not every source will be appropriate for your paper. Once you have done background research and located specific sources, review your sources to decide which are most dependable, helpful, and appropriate for your topic. Below is an explanation of the types of sources you'll come across. Check the parameters of your assignment to find out which types will work best for you.

Primary Sources

Primary sources convey information from someone who actually observed an event, performed original research, or wrote an original text. In the humanities, primary sources are first-hand accounts, like Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, or creative works, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the sciences, primary sources are the reports or results of studies, like Isaac Newton's *Principia*. These sources are original rather than summary or commentary.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources discuss a primary source, like a journal article that summarizes the findings of scientists at Johns Hopkins University. These sources can help you analyze and interpret primary texts.

Peer-Reviewed Sources: Peer-reviewed sources have been analyzed and substantiated by experts in the field. This makes this type of secondary source the most credible. Most articles found through library databases have been peer-reviewed, but to filter out non-reviewed sources, you can check the “peer-reviewed” box during your search.

Non Peer-Reviewed Sources: If your source is **not** peer reviewed, you will need to evaluate how credible it is. Because sources published on the internet (websites, blogs, magazines, news articles, etc.) are largely unmonitored, their information may be inaccurate or unverifiable. When evaluating these sources, look for the following information:

- The **date** the source was published (an old date may mean the source is not current or accurate.)
- The **person or organization** responsible for the source (well-respected organizations would be more reliable than casual bloggers, for example.)
- The site **domain** on a website (sites ending in “.edu,” “.org,” or “.gov” are generally more credible than “.com” websites.)

After initially scanning the source, look closer at the content. A reliable source will have:

- An objective tone
- Claims backed up by factual evidence
- Reliable references within the text
- A fairly represented counterargument

Additional Help with Research

For customized help with the research process, visit a research consultant in the Research and Writing Center in 3340 HBLL, contact a subject librarian who specializes in your topic, or chat with a BYU librarian online by clicking on the *Chat* icon on the main library page.