

THE ACADEMIC SUCCESS CENTER

at **Sam Houston™**
STATE UNIVERSITY

Evaluating Sources

Navigating sources can be difficult even for the most experienced college students. When looking for either print or internet sources, there are several guidelines you can use to ensure that the sources you choose are both reliable and useful to you in an academic paper.

Why Isn't the Internet Reliable?

Anyone who has a computer — from professors to grade-school children — can publish on the Internet.

The Internet is an anonymous space in which people can claim false credentials. It is also widely used as a space in which people can pursue their hobbies; having a casual interest in something is very different from being an expert.

Because the Internet reaches a wide audience, many people use it as a way to further their own political agendas. These people might post things that are not true — simply to support their cause.

How to Use the Internet for Research:

As a student of SHSU, you have access to a large variety of online databases; check out the “Databases” area on the Newton Gresham Library website. These are collections of major journal, newspaper, and magazine articles, which are generally peer-reviewed (edited by an outside source who is an expert in the field). Try searching for information on your topic in databases like EBSCOhost, LexisNexis, or JSTOR. When you find an article that is relevant to your research, check out the bibliography. This could lead you to other valuable sources. Google Scholar is another highly accessible engine that can be used to find sources.

Additionally, see if the source lists a person or organization as the author. If not, be wary of the source’s credibility. If so, what does a Google search reveal about that person or organization? Always verify your information.

A Word About Wikipedia:

Since Wikipedia allows volunteers to submit content to their website, you cannot be sure that their information is correct. Use Wikipedia only as a launching point; there are links at the bottom of their pages that could help you find a reliable source. As a scholar, you should always make sure to verify your information and confirm your sources.

Information on this handout borrowed from:

The Craft of Research by Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams.

Kinds of Print Sources

Primary sources come directly from a time period or experience/event, or the texts your paper is analyzing. For a paper about Hamlet, the play itself is a primary source. Other examples include letters, diaries, public records, and speeches.

Secondary sources are works that comment upon or otherwise make use of primary sources. A biography of Shakespeare and a scholarly article about the play could be useful secondary sources for a paper about Hamlet.

A General Hierarchy of Secondary Source Reliability

Peer-reviewed journal articles and books. These texts have been read by a number of experts and have passed the standards of academic quality.

Books, articles, and collections written or compiled by scholars. Books by scholars are often produced by writers with a professional commitment to quality.

Books, articles, and collections written or compiled by journalists for objective purposes. While journalists are not experts on the subjects they cover, they do have a professional obligation to report facts and to maintain integrity. Note: Know the difference between journalism and punditry, reporting and editorializing.

Books, articles, and collections written or compiled by non-scholars/non-journalists. Scholars strive to be experts on their subject. Journalists strive to adhere to a code of ethics while other writers may not have the training to produce work of academic quality.

Articles from popular sources and tabloids. Other periodicals do not base their identity or information on factual reliability, but, rather, on entertainment and scandal.

Tips for Using Print Sources

Consider the author. Is he or she an expert? A scholar? What qualifies this person to write about this subject?

Browse the bibliography. The most useful scholarly sources will themselves use sources. Whereas tertiary ("popular") texts will not always make their own research plain, proper academic sources will usually feature citations.

Notice the publisher. Look for university presses or commercial presses with recognized reputations for academic quality in the relevant field.

Read critically. Keep an eye out for author's who sound biased. Some writers have an agenda that could compromise the objectivity, and therefore the quality, of their work.

Read widely. Expand your understanding of an area by exploring many reliable sources from the field. While a single work may stand out as well-argued or helpful, you can make such a judgment reasonably only after reading several works.