

Evaluating Print Sources

- 👤 Potential problems with internet sources may be more obvious than those posed by print sources, but researchers must dutifully evaluate the quality of print sources as well.

Kinds of Print Sources

- 👤 Primary sources come directly from a time period or experience, 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. Though not necessarily subjected to other experts, books by scholars are 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. Other writers, no matter how well-intentioned, simply may not have the training or motivation to produce work that suits academic purposes.
- 👤 Articles from popular sources. Newspapers and certain magazines fall under number three above. Other periodicals do not base their identity on factual reliability, but, rather, on entertainment and, worse, scandal.

Certain information and advice taken from:

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

Tips for Using Print Sources

-  Consider the author. Is 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.
-  As you read a number of sources in a particular subject, you may notice certain authors or titles that are mentioned over and over again. Try to find these “foundational” or “landmark” works.
-  Look over the copyright page.
-  Notice the publisher. Look for university presses or commercial presses with recognized reputations for academic quality in the relevant field.
-  Check the date. Look for recent books.
-  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 particularly well argued or helpful, you can make such a judgment reasonably only after reading several works.