

ASSESSING SOURCES

When researching a particular topic, it is important to show academic diligence by vetting your sources to ensure that they are scholarly and ideal. In turn, this leads to accurate research and a well substantiated argument. The following resource will give you support in vetting your sources.

When using the library's resources to find articles for your research, improve your search by limiting it to articles written within a certain period of time. You can also exclude journals that are not peer-reviewed.

IS MY SOURCE SCHOLARLY?

The first question you should ask yourself when assessing a source is whether it is *scholarly*. While your approach may differ depending on the type of source, generally you can determine this by looking into the credentials of the author and publisher.

General Questions:

- 1. Is the publisher known for reliable work?** Some publishers have few barriers for publication and are willing to publish fairly questionable works.
 - a. Reliable book publisher examples - Oxford University Press, Penguin, and Routledge
 - b. Reliable journal examples - *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *Cell*, and *Annual Review of Psychology*
- 2. Does the author have experience and/or education in the topic they are writing about?** Determine this quickly by identifying the author's credentials. Even if the author has a Ph.D., make sure it is related to the subject at hand.
- 3. Who is the intended audience?** The tone of the source can indicate the author's intended audience. If it contains a fair amount of citations and technical terms, it is likely written for people knowledgeable in the field and is more likely to be scholarly.
- 4. What is the goal of the publisher?** Scholarly journals seek to publish researchers' findings in a specific field to disseminate information. On the other hand, magazines often focus on writing for an audience's entertainment or provide broad overviews of topics to general audiences. Think tanks may be interested in promoting a particular ideology or cause.

Journal Articles:

- 5. Is the article peer-reviewed?** Peer review is a process in which other qualified experts in a given field assess the credibility of an article. Approval through peer review indicates that the evidence and methodologies in the article are generally accepted and reliable in the academic community.

Books:

- 6. Was the book self-published?** For a book to be published by a credible publisher, it must pass the publisher's critical review processes. To avoid this scrutiny, some authors self-publish their books; thus, these sources lack the scholarly backing of regularly published sources.

Websites

- 7. Is the organization reliable?** When assessing whether a website is scholarly, do some research into its organization. Is it an academic organization that has high standards for its work, or is it a more casual, less credible organization?

IS MY SOURCE IDEAL?

Having an ideal source means that the source is not just scholarly but is also *relevant* to your topic. You want to ensure you have various sources that discuss different facets of the topic from an array of perspectives. When considering whether a source is ideal to use, ask yourself several questions:

- 1. Was the source recently written?**

- a. Certain disciplines, especially in the sciences, are constantly changing. Thus, an ideal source would be recently published, but this depends on your field of study.

- 2. Does the source directly or tangentially relate to my argument?**

- a. Clearly applicable to your argument. If it only slightly overlaps with the topic you are discussing, you likely can find better sources.

- 3. Does this source offer a new perspective?**

- a. Make sure you analyze issues from multiple perspectives, so you can address opposing viewpoints.

- 4. What type of research does the source conduct?**

- a. Determine whether the research is qualitative or quantitative and whether the results are broadly applicable.

- 5. Does this research derive findings similar to other research?**

- a. Results are more reliable if they can be replicated.

- 6. Is research data provided? Does it seem to accurately support the researcher's conclusions?**

- a. Be wary of sources that do not provide their research data, since you cannot verify the author's conclusions. By reading through the results, you can determine whether the authors' conclusions are merited.

Consider the following scenario:

You are writing a historical analysis discussing the impacts and evolution of medical care during the American Civil War. You come across a paper written by a medical doctor (MD) discussing the history of medicine during this period. The journal that published this paper is reputable and has a peer review process. The author of this article does not tend to write about historical topics and usually publishes papers about their specific specialty in medicine.

- 1. While reading this paper, ask yourself the following questions to assess whether it is scholarly and ideal:**
 - a. Where does the data the author is analyzing come from?
 - b. Do the author's conclusions align with historians who discuss this topic?
 - c. Since the author is not formally a historian, does their bibliography/reference list show that they are well-researched in this field?
 - d. Who is the author's intended audience? Is the paper written informally to a general audience? Is it written for medical professionals or historians?
- 2. How does the author's background affect your assessment of whether the source is ideal?**
 - a. The author's background as an MD provides them with a certain expertise in medical knowledge many historians lack. The author's unique perspective in the historical discussion could be ideal for providing new insight.
 - b. Since the author does not have a background as a historian, readers should be cautious. This does not mean that the article is not ideal; however, one should be critical while reading to ensure the author is exercising due diligence while providing a historical account.

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