

# Finding Reliable Sources

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about some of the strategies historians use when they research the past. We will also consider how those strategies can help you identify trustworthy information to use in everyday problem solving. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. How Do Historians Find Information?
2. Use Key Words
3. Stay Relevant
4. Check Credibility
5. Top 10 Tips for Sourcing Success
6. Sources in Everyday Life



## BEFORE YOU START

How do historians find sources that are reliable as well as relevant to their topic?

## 1. How Do Historians Find Information?

When historians research a historical topic, they use many different resources. They start with library catalogs and databases of scholarly journals. These help them find secondary sources. To find primary sources, they often visit **archives**—special collections of historical documents or other records.

Many historians today also access online resources to research a topic. Vast numbers of historical sources are available on the internet. From the [U.S. National Archives](#) to collections from smaller libraries, there are enough digitized sources online now to keep historians (and history students!) busy for decades. This means that good search strategies are as important today as ever.



## HINT

For the touchstone assignment in Unit 2, you will select a research question that you will focus on for your presentation that is due at the end of the course. One of the first steps is to look for the sources that will provide answers. You will have access to a list of primary and secondary sources, but you'll still need to figure out which ones will help you answer your specific research question. That's where key words can help.



## TERM TO KNOW

## 2. Use Key Words

Key words are specific words or phrases associated with a topic. Although key words aren't required in a search engine like Google, they can still help in weeding out some of the less relevant results.

➦ **EXAMPLE** The phrase “energy crisis 1970s Houston” will return more specific results than just “energy crisis” or even “energy crisis 1970s.”

Think of key words as like the main ingredients of a recipe—the components that have to be there for the final dish to be what it's supposed to be.



Also for the touchstone assignment in Unit 2, you'll need to come up with some key words for your own topic. These key words will help you narrow your search as you look through possible sources to figure out which ones to use in your slide presentation.

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## 3. Stay Relevant

With so much information available to researchers today, it's especially important to be able to figure out what's **relevant**, or directly related to the topic or question. Although you'll be provided with a list of sources in this course, you'll still need to figure out which ones are most relevant to your own presentation.

As you work with sources, ask yourself some questions:

- What question am I trying to answer? What information will support that goal?
- Who are my readers, and what kind of evidence will they expect?
- Can I identify the main idea or main topic of the source? Is it directly connected to the information I need?
- Am I seeing answers to any of the questions I'm researching?

Start by looking at the title of the source and reading the opening paragraphs to get a sense of its main idea. If the source is relevant, then you should be able to find at least some of the information you're looking for, which means it's a good idea to keep reading.



### Relevant

Containing information that is directly related to the topic being researched.

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## 4. Check Credibility

Sources are **credible** if they are considered trustworthy because of the recognized credentials and/or experience with a topic, especially the topic that is being researched.



## HINT

In this course, you're provided with a list of credible sources you can use to research your topic. For the touchstone assignment in Unit 2, however, you'll need to explain why your sources are credible.

Beyond that, to use the internet effectively for your future courses and in the workplace, you'll need to know how to identify reliable sources online. There is a great deal of excellent information easily available on the internet, but there is also plenty of information that isn't trustworthy.

The trick to finding reliable information is to ask yourself some questions as you examine a new source:

- **Who wrote it?** Does the author have credentials like a degree or extensive work experience related to the subject matter? Sometimes it's necessary to do a separate online search for the author's name to make sure their education or experience qualify them to write about this topic.
- **What is its purpose?** Check the publisher—the individual or organization that has put out the source. Is this a reference source like a dictionary or encyclopedia? Is this website from a university? Or is it from a company, institution, or news outlet that may have a particular perspective or agenda?
- **When was it published?** Look for the date of publication. How recent is this source? :\*This will also help you determine whether it is a primary source (from the time you're studying) or a secondary source (written by scholars at a later date).
- **What's the evidence?** How does the author back up the argument? Check the references provided. If the author doesn't provide any, look at other sources to see if the information is consistent.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Credible

Being considered trustworthy because of recognized credentials and/or experience with a topic, especially the one being researched.

## 5. Top 10 Tips for Sourcing Success



### Problem Solving: Skill Tip

Learning to source information, successfully, is the key to solving problems in your life and career. In this challenge's *Quick Tips*, journalists reveal their top tips for sourcing so you can get to the who, what, when, and why of any topic.

1. **Think Small.** You've got big plans and big ideas! But when it comes to picking a topic for your research, you need to narrow your focus. Want to know more about the American Civil War, for instance? Then try narrowing your topic to focus on something more specific like famous generals or weapons used by the South. You can also narrow your topic by limiting it to a specific time or place. Zooming in on a specific topic will help ensure you can complete the research necessary to make your point.
2. **Think Smaller.** You've whittled your topic down to a nice little nugget. But if you really want to find the most relevant sources, it helps to hone it down even further. Make a list of subtopics that can help to

guide your search. If your topic is Women in WWII, subtopics might include women in the military, in resistance movements, and in the civilian workforce.

3. **Know what you need.** There are about 1.5 billion websites out there and 130 million book titles. So, knowing what kind of research you need is essential for starting in the right place. Do you need hard facts? Expert opinions? Military stats? Or just general info? Knowing what you are looking for will help you determine where to look!
4. **Create a list of keywords.** What concepts and keywords relate to your topic? For instance, maybe you're researching Thailand and discover that it used to be called Siam. Jot it down! That extra info could help you dig deeper into your research, especially when it comes to internet searches. Try utilizing advanced search options to select the scope of your search, and you'll save time and score the most helpful sources, first!
5. **Get friendly with your thesaurus.** Brainstorming a list of synonyms for your topics could help you hit the research jackpot. Looking up facts on Native American culture? Try searching for "indigenous people" instead. Also, some databases let you truncate — that means you can search for part of a word, but still get results for different forms of that word. For example, searching for "homeless" would bring back articles that use the words homeless or homelessness.
6. **Get organized.** You've got a great topic, and you're excited to dive right in. Whoa! Hang on a sec! Set yourself up for sourcing success by first creating a simple record to keep track of where you're searching and what you're searching for. Whether it's a handwritten log, a Google doc, or an Excel spreadsheet, organizing your efforts will save you time and energy and help you avoid looking in the same place twice.
7. **Don't forget the library!** While there's no question that the internet has made research easier and faster, books are still a solid bet for kicking off a quest for credible info. Try starting your search in your local library!
8. **Mine the bibliography.** Found a great source? Go check out its sources for more ideas on where you should research!
9. **Use Google Scholar.** Check out this well-respected online spot for scholarly literature and peer-reviewed material. Search for articles, theses, books, abstracts, and court opinions, as well as academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities, and other websites.
10. **Reassess your research strategy.** Did you find the information you needed? If not, now's the time to step back and ask why. Maybe you need to brainstorm some different keywords and concepts? Or maybe it's time to talk to your local (or school!) librarian or reach out to an expert in your topic. The resources are there — go find them!



You can download these quick tips as a PDF below to keep as you practice these strategies for your touchstone assignment. They'll turn into good search habits that you can use in other parts of your life.

 [Quick Tips: Top 10 Tips for Sourcing Success](#)

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## 6. Sources in Everyday Life

Thinking like a historian can be helpful in a broad range of day-to-day tasks. Finding relevant information will help you make stronger decisions, for example. And if you're writing a proposal or a report at work, using relevant evidence and reliable data will make your case stronger.

## IN CONTEXT

Imagine you are put in charge of creating a safety presentation for your coworkers. In order to do a good job and make sure your coworkers have all the information they need, you'll need to consult many sources. Some examples might include government illustrations on how to do CPR, your building's emergency evacuation map, advice from police officers on best practices, and interviews with other staff members about safety issues they have seen in the past. Making sure your sources provide accurate and relevant information will be critical to the safety of your team.

In the next lesson, let's take the tools of the historian—critical reading of good sources—to look back at the economic history of the United States and turn to another skill that's critical in today's workplace: agility.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned **how historians find information** when seeking to answer historical questions. One strategy they employ is to **use key words** when searching for information in libraries or archives, and they must think carefully about what combination of words will return targeted results. Other strategies include **staying relevant** by clearly identifying the topic of their research, and **checking the credibility** of their potential sources. The same strategies that historians use to find information are equally useful for anyone searching for credible **sources in everyday life**.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Archives

Collections of records about a specific place, topic, or time period.

### Credible

Being considered trustworthy because of recognized credentials and/or experience with a topic, especially the one being researched.

### Relevant

Containing information that is directly related to the topic being researched.