Finding Sources

by Sophia Tutorial

> **WHAT'S COVERED**
>
> This tutorial explains how to find sources for a research paper, in libraries and online. It covers the different kinds of sources, including physical and digital sources, and provides some tips on how to optimize the use of search engines. An opportunity to practice these techniques in a model search process is also provided.
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> This tutorial examines the process of locating and identifying sources in six parts:
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> 1. Types of Sources
> 2. Physical Sources and the Library
> 3. Digital Sources and Academic Libraries
> 4. Online Sources
> 5. Searching Online and in Library Databases
> 6. A Model Search

1. Types of Sources

Sources come in a variety of forms. Following are the most common types of sources:

- Books
- Articles in academic journals
- News reports and opinion-based essays (e.g., editorials)
- Magazine articles
- Government reports
- Online sources (e.g, websites, blogs)
- Nonfiction television programs (including documentaries)

> **HINT**

All sources are not created equal: not all of these types of sources are equally credible.

Writers must carefully select the sources and information that they use in their written work. This tutorial is focused on learning how to find and evaluate sources of information most effectively.

2. Physical Sources and the Library

Many sources, both primary and secondary, are only available in physical form (e.g., books, articles, and other artifacts). It's likely that at least some of the research materials you'll need will only be available in published form — in print or another non-electronic form. Consulting these sources often involves a trip to the library.

Many public libraries participate in inter-library loan systems to provide researchers with access to academic sources. The process of accessing academic sources in this way is often time-consuming. It takes longer to get information through a public library inter-library loan than it takes researchers who are directly associated with a university or community college library to get it through those institutions.

⚑ HINT

Researchers who think they might need to use a loan program should allow extra time to do so. It can often take a week or more for materials, especially rare books, to become available.

Because almost all libraries have online catalogs, searching for sources is, for the most part, an intuitive process. This is helpful to those who are used to searching for information on the internet. Electronic searching can save a researcher a trip to the library to look for a source that may not be available.

⊘ DID YOU KNOW

Librarians are a good source for advice and assistance on how to search. Professional academic and public librarians (not library assistants and others who work for a library) are expert researchers, in addition to having a good idea of what's in their library's collection and how to find relevant resources on obscure or difficult topics.

3. Digital Sources and Academic Libraries

Academic libraries (i.e., those that are part of private and public colleges and universities, and community colleges) subscribe to databases that specialize in sources on a wide range of topics.

⤷ EXAMPLE There are, for example, databases devoted entirely to medical, psychological, humanities, law, and news media sources.

These databases are excellent places to search for peer-reviewed sources related to a specific topic or field of study. Going directly to the subject-specific databases can save researchers a lot of time, because databases often point to credible sources that are relevant to a topic of interest.

The best way to determine which databases can be accessed through an academic library is to visit the library's website. You can also ask librarians to direct you to the most appropriate databases for your topic. When searching in a database, vary your search keywords and use "advanced search" options to get the best results — just as you would when performing a search online for personal reasons.

4. Online Sources

Many sources of information are available online, and an increasing number of credible publications are appearing in online editions.

> 🚩 **HINT**

Not everything is available on the internet. Don't neglect physical sources, even though they sometimes require more work to locate.

Searching online can be overwhelming at first, due the vast amount of information available. New researchers may be intimidated by the challenge of evaluating large amounts of information and the need to contribute something on a subject when so much has already been written. However, all writers — students and experienced professionals — should focus on their immediate purpose and use effective online research strategies. Don't let online research lead to writer's block and procrastination.

5. Searching Online (and in Library Databases)

When searching for information online, it's important to vary the search terms that you use. Doing so will usually lead to different results, which may be more relevant or useful than those you located using other terms.

> ⤷ EXAMPLE Entering "civil rights" in a search engine (e.g., Google, Yahoo!, etc.) will produce different results than "civil liberties," even though these terms are often used interchangeably.

It's important to consider both the *denotative* and *connotative* meanings of the words and phrases that you use in search engines. Try several different terms, using different angles to approach the topic. Change terms from formal to informal to maximize the results. It's also a good idea to go past the first page of search results when you use commercial search engines (e.g., Google), because they often prioritize results that are popular, and those that they have been paid to prioritize. Though they may be listed near or at the top of the results returned for a search, neither of these types of results are necessarily credible or relevant sources.

Maintain a critical stance when evaluating the sources that you locate online. Carefully assess a potential source's credibility and relevance to your topic. By doing so, you'll find better sources more quickly.

> **IN CONTEXT**
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> "Google Scholar" (scholar.google.com) is a Google search engine that is focused specifically on academic sources. Writers, especially those who lack easy access to an academic library's shared database, can use Google Scholar to find the peer-reviewed sources that are often the best sources for academic research essays. The standard Google search engine (and other search engines) include an "advanced search" option that provides researchers with greater control of the results of a search. Advanced search enables researchers to specify how the search engine interprets their keywords, to search for information based on when it was posted, and to return results based on the web page where they originate.

6. A Model Search

The following example illustrates the difference that varying search terms can make in the research process. Suppose you've been assigned an essay in an art history class on the topic of the artistic movement called Cubism. Assuming that it's not a subject you're familiar with, you might begin your search with the standard Google search engine (google.com). Your first search, based on the terms "cubism" and "art," yields a large amount of introductory information — mostly tertiary sources including Wikipedia, a few museum websites, and even some sites that sell art prints. Most of these results provide basic facts about Cubism, which might be a good way to start your research, even if you don't find anything to use in your essay.

Search Terms	Search Results
"cubism," "art"	Tertiary sources (e.g., Wikipedia, museum sites, advertisements for art prints)

After acquiring basic information on Cubism from the tertiary sources, you probably have a better understanding of what you are looking for. To focus your investigation, you decide to search for "analytical cubism," an offshoot of the movement that you discovered in your initial research, and "Juan Gris," one of the artists credited with starting it. This time, there are fewer tertiary sources in the results, and more specific articles and websites (e.g., an article on Juan Gris, who liked to paint people smoking pipes, in a magazine devoted to pipes and pipe smoking).

Search Terms	Search Results
"analytical cubism," "Juan Gris"	More specific, secondary sources — some relevant, others unrelated to my topic

As you scroll through more of the results, you find other useful sources including entries on a communal artists' site. Although these are aimed at an audience that knows more about Analytical Cubism than you do, the articles refer to other movements and artists, and make assumptions about readers' interests and perspectives. As a result, they are useful to you. You've located an established discourse community related to your topic, which makes it likely that these sources are credible. Because they're written for people who understand the topic, the chances that they are completely inaccurate are much lower.

To find sources that are more focused on the art (i.e., sources that examine how cubists like Gris created their art) you perform another search using the terms "cubism" and "human figure." You've chosen these terms because you are most interested in the way cubists break human figures into component shapes and portray them in a fractured way. As sometimes happens in searches, you get mixed results.

Search Terms	Search Results
"cubism," "human figure"	Mixed results, one less-than-credible source, and one very interesting, specific, and credible source

The first interesting site that you explore (i.e., the first site that isn't a tertiary source or for-profit website) turns out to be a disappointment. Although at first it seems to be exactly what you are looking for, after reading further you realize that the site is being used to promote ideas about what is (and is not) "real" art. These claims are made without evidence or support. You decide not to consider it as a credible source.

However, another source — an e-book about the French reception of Cubism — uses citations and references to other sources to make an argument about how Cubism spread among artists. It contends that this process did not only occur through imitation, but also by inspiring artists outside the movement to reconsider their assumptions about perspective and form. It seems like it could be a very useful source for your essay. The key takeaway is that you would not have found this source if you hadn't been willing to make multiple searches

and vary search terms. By making adjustments in your search terms, you were able to uncover new results.

	SUMMARY

This tutorial described how to find sources for a research paper. It identified and examined the different types of sources (and where to find them), including libraries, online catalogs and databases, and also outlined the effective use of search engines. An example of online searching was provided to illustrate the useful results that varied, open-ended searches can yield.

Source: Adapted from Sophia Instructor Gavin McCall