

# Research Tips: Start Early, Use a Bibliography, and Evaluate Material Critically

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn several tips for conducting effective research. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Start Early
2. Use a Bibliography
3. Evaluate Material Critically

## 1. Start Early

*By failing to prepare you are preparing to fail.*—Benjamin Franklin

*Well begun is half done.*—Aristotle

Mark Twain once said, "It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech. " If it took that long for Mark Twain, one of the most eloquent speakers in American history, to write a "good impromptu speech," students of public speaking should take note and get a nice, early start on the research process.

American philosopher Wayne Burgraff estimated that speakers should spend one hour of preparation for every minute of presentation.

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## 2. Use a Bibliography

Consulting a **bibliography** will make your research process more efficient. Bibliographies compile publication information about books, articles, and other resources that address a particular topic.

Some bibliographies appear as standalone books, while others appear in academic journals or online resources. Annotated bibliographies summarize the main argument of each resource. If a bibliography is recent enough, it can be a one-stop shop for all of your research needs, pointing to many credible sources.

However, if the bibliography is old, or if you need the most current information about your topic, you should fill the gap between the end of the bibliography and the present time by looking for articles and books from that time period.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Bibliography

A list of books or documents relevant to a particular subject or author.

## 3. Evaluate Material Critically

*90% of everything is garbage!*—Theodore Sturgeon

"90% of everything" might be an exaggeration, but, sadly, there is a lot of garbage out there. If you carefully evaluate your sources to make sure they are credible, you stand to save yourself a lot of trouble.

#### IN CONTEXT

Here's a cautionary tale: Iranian news outlet *Fars* became a laughingstock after it picked up an American news story claiming that the majority of white Americans in rural areas would rather vote for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad than President Barack Obama. That doesn't sound quite right, does it? Of course, the original story came from *The Onion*, a satirical newspaper. If the journalists at Fars had checked out their source, they could have avoided an embarrassing mistake. Use your **critical thinking** skills to make sure you understand the context of your research!

Reliable sources must be strong enough to support the claim. A lightweight source may sometimes be acceptable for a lightweight claim, but never for an extraordinary claim.

Questionable sources are those with a poor reputation for checking the facts, or with no editorial oversight. Such sources include websites and publications expressing views that are widely acknowledged as extremist, that are promotional in nature, or which rely heavily on rumors and personal opinions.

Questionable sources are generally unsuitable for citing contentious claims about third parties, which includes claims against institutions, persons living or dead, as well as more ill-defined entities. The proper uses of a questionable source are very limited.

Sometimes "non-neutral" sources are the best possible sources for supporting information about the different viewpoints held on a subject. When dealing with a potentially biased source, editors should consider whether the source meets the normal requirements for reliable sources, such as editorial control and a reputation for fact-checking.

Editors should also consider whether the bias makes it appropriate to use in-text attribution to the source. Each source must be carefully weighed to judge whether it is reliable for the statement being made and is an appropriate source for that content. In general, the more people engaged in checking facts, analyzing legal issues, and scrutinizing the writing, the more reliable the publication.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Critical Thinking

The application of logical principles, rigorous standards of evidence, and careful reasoning to the analysis and discussion of claims, beliefs, and issues.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned some ways to ensure that you conduct the research process effectively. Even seasoned public speakers **start preparing early**— follow their lead! **Bibliographies**, which compile many different sources that address a particular topic, are great research tools. Make sure you understand the context of your research and **evaluate the material critically**, especially if you are looking at unfamiliar sources.

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