

Strategies for Gathering Reliable Information

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how to locate and evaluate resources for your paper. Specifically, this lesson will focus on:

1. Using Primary and Secondary Sources

Now that you have planned your research project, you are ready to begin the research. This phase can be both exciting and challenging, so it's helpful to break down the different source types you will likely be working with.

As you learned in a previous lesson, writers classify research resources into two categories:

- Primary
- Secondary

Primary sources are direct, firsthand sources of information or data.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you were writing a paper about the First Amendment right to freedom of speech, the text of the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights would be a primary source.

Other examples of primary sources include:

- Research articles
- Literary texts
- Historical documents, such as diaries or letters
- Autobiographies or other personal accounts

Secondary sources discuss, interpret, analyze, consolidate, or otherwise rework information from primary sources.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In researching a paper about the First Amendment, you might read articles about legal cases that involved First Amendment rights or editorials expressing commentary on the First Amendment. These sources would be considered secondary sources because they are one step removed from the primary source of information.

Other examples of secondary sources include:

- Magazine articles
- Biographical books
- Literary and scientific reviews
- Television documentaries

Your topic and purpose determine whether you must use both primary and secondary sources in your paper. Ask yourself which sources are most likely to provide the information that will answer your research question.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you are writing a research paper about reality television shows, you will need to use some reality shows as a primary source, but secondary sources, such as a reviewer's critiques, are also important. If you are writing about the health effects of nicotine, you will probably want to read the published results of scientific studies, but secondary sources, such as magazine articles discussing the outcome of a recent study, may also be helpful.



TERMS TO KNOW

Primary Source

A direct, first-hand source of information or data.

Secondary Source

A discussion, interpretation, analysis, consolidation, or other reworking of information from a primary source or another secondary source.

2. Finding Print Resources

Once you have thought about what kinds of sources are most likely to help you answer your research question, you may begin your search for print and electronic resources.

The challenge here is to conduct your search efficiently. Writers use strategies to help them find the sources that are most relevant and reliable while steering clear of sources that will not be useful.

Print resources include a vast array of documents and publications. Regardless of your topic, you will want to consult some print resources as part of your research. You will of course use electronic sources as well, but it is not wise to limit yourself to electronic sources, as some potentially useful sources may be available only in print form.

The table below lists different types of print resources available at public and university libraries.

Resource Type	Description	Example(s)
Reference works	Reference works provide a summary of information about a particular topic. Almanacs, encyclopedias, atlases, medical reference books, and scientific abstracts are examples of reference works. In some cases, reference books may not be checked out of a library.	<i>The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2010</i>
	Note that reference works are many steps removed from original primary	<i>Diagnostic and</i>

	sources and are often brief, so these should be used only as a starting point when you gather information.	<i>Statistical Manual</i>
Nonfiction books	Nonfiction books provide in-depth coverage of a topic. Trade books, biographies, and how-to guides are usually written for a general audience. Scholarly books and scientific studies are usually written for an audience that has specialized knowledge of a topic.	<i>The Origin of Species</i>
Periodicals and news sources	These sources are published at regular intervals— daily, weekly, monthly, or quarterly. Newspapers, magazines, and academic journals are examples. Some periodicals provide articles on subjects of general interest, while others are more specialized.	<i>New York Times</i> <i>JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association</i>
Government publications	Federal, state, and local government agencies publish information on a variety of topics. Government publications include reports, legislation, court documents, public records, statistics, studies, guides, programs, and forms.	<i>Census 2000 Profile</i>
Business and nonprofit publications	Business and nonprofit organizations produce publications designed to market a product, provide background about the organization, provide information on topics connected to the organization, or promote a cause. These publications include reports, newsletters, advertisements, manuals, brochures, and other print documents.	A company's instruction manual explaining how to use a specific software program A news release published by the Sierra Club

2a. Using Indexes and Databases

Library catalogs can help you locate book-length sources, as well as some types of non-print holdings, such as CDs, DVDs, and audiobooks.

To locate shorter sources, such as magazine and journal articles, you will need to use a periodical index or an online periodical database. These tools index the articles that appear in newspapers, magazines, and journals. Like catalogs, they provide publication information about an article and often allow users to access a summary or even the full text of the article.

Print indexes may be available in the periodicals section of your library. Increasingly, libraries use online databases that users can access through the library website. A single library may provide access to multiple periodical databases. These can range from general news databases to specialized databases.

The table below describes some commonly used indexes and databases.

Resource	Format	Contents
<i>New York Times Index</i>	Print	Guide to articles published in the <i>New York Times</i>
ProQuest	Online	Database that archives content from newspapers, magazines, and

		dissertations
Psychlit, PsychINFO	Online	Databases that archive content from journals in psychology and psychiatry
Business Source Complete	Online	Database that archives business-related content from magazines and journals
MEDLINE, PubMed	Online	Databases that archive articles in medicine and health
EBSCOhost	Online	General database that provides access to articles on a wide variety of topics

3. Finding Electronic Resources

Some types of resources, such as television documentaries, may only be available electronically. Other resources—for instance, many newspapers and magazines—may be available in both print and electronic form.

The following are some of the electronic sources you might consult:

- Online databases
- CD-ROMs
- Popular web search engines
- Websites maintained by universities, nonprofits, or government agencies
- Newspapers, magazines, and journals published on the web
- E-books
- Audiobooks
- Industry blogs
- Radio and television programs and other audio and video recordings
- Online discussion groups

The techniques you use to locate print resources can also help you find electronic resources efficiently. Libraries usually include CD-ROMs, audiobooks, and audio and video recordings among their holdings. You can locate these materials in the catalog using a keyword search.

3a. Using Internet Search Engines

When faced with the challenge of writing a research paper, some students rely on popular search engines as their first source of information. Typing a keyword or phrase into a search engine instantly pulls up links to dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of related websites—what could be easier?

Unfortunately, despite its apparent convenience, this research strategy has the following drawbacks to consider:

1. *Results do not always appear in order of reliability.* The first few hits that appear in search results may include sites whose content is not always reliable, such as online encyclopedias that can be edited by any user. Because websites are created by third parties, the search engine cannot tell you which sites have accurate information.

2. Results may be too numerous for you to use. The amount of information available on the web is far greater than the amount of information housed within a particular library or database. Realistically, if your web search pulls up thousands of hits, you will not be able to visit every site—and the most useful sites may be buried deep within your search results.
3. Search engines are not connected to the results of the search. Search engines find websites that people visit often and list the results in order of popularity. The search engine, then, is not connected to any of the results. When you cite a source found through a search engine, you do not need to cite the search engine. Only cite the source.

A general web search can provide a helpful overview of a topic and may pull up genuinely useful resources. To get the most out of a search engine, however, consider strategies to make your search more efficient, such as using multiple keywords to limit your results or clicking on the "Advanced Search" link on the homepage to find additional options for streamlining your search.

Depending on the specific search engine you use, the following options may be available:

- Limit results to websites that have been updated within a particular time frame.
- Limit results by language or country.
- Limit results to scholarly works available online.
- Limit results by file type.
- Limit results to a particular domain type, such as .edu or .gov.

Use the "Bookmarks" or "Favorites" feature on your web browser to save and organize sites that look promising.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **using primary and secondary sources** in your research. You also learned how to **find print resources** by using **indexes and databases**, and how to **find electronic resources** by using **Internet search engines**. Using both of these methods can help you locate a variety of relevant sources for your research essay.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Strategies for Gathering Reliable Information" tutorial.



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