

SPOTLIGHT ON... RELIABLE SOURCES

In unit 4 you learned the research writing process, but we did not have time to discuss sources in much depth. We cannot cover everything there is to know about locating and using good sources, but a discussion of reliable sources is essential before you work on your next research paper.

Good cooks will tell you that a recipe is only as good as its ingredients, and the same is true about research-based writing. Because it depends on facts and expert opinions for its quality, it can only be as good as the writer's sources. Excellent writing takes a back seat to credibility in a research paper. To be credible, or believable, the writer must use credible sources. These sources must be verifiable (provable) experts and witnesses. Sure, a writer can fool a trusting reader with a professional appearance and sources that *seem* credible, but shoddy work eventually falls apart.

Reliable sources can be either primary or secondary. Primary sources are gold to a research writer, because they include original documents and living witnesses and other “firsthand” materials. Though their reliability isn't certain and needs to be verified as much as possible—witnesses can forget important details, for example—they are usually more reliable than “secondary sources.”

Secondary sources are what students usually use for research projects. They include books, documentaries, articles, and other sources from people who do not have firsthand knowledge of the writer's subject. Your history textbook is an example of a secondary source, because it discusses past events and people, but the authors are basing their information on sources that *they* researched. “The Declaration of Independence” is an example of a primary source, because it is the actual document that your history textbook might discuss.

Primary sources are important to quality research, but beginning and student writers are limited in their ability to find them. They don't have the benefit of an expense account like professionals have that allows them to visit sources located far from their homes—an artifact or historical site, for example. If the primary source isn't accessible either in person or digitally, then the writer must use secondary sources.

To be reliable, though, the secondary source must be verifiable or clearly credible in some way. The writer or interviewee needs to be an obvious expert on the subject or otherwise closely connected to the topic being researched. For example, if the writer is researching the history of Russia's famous Bolshoi Ballet, a ballet historian with a doctorate degree will be a much more reliable source than an American blogger who loves ballet history. Both *may* be equally reliable, of course, because the armchair enthusiast may have done meticulous research. For the purposes of a research paper where reliable sources are a must, however, only the historian's work should be used. The blogger's post is much more likely to be riddled with mistakes.

This brings us to the topic of what kinds of sources are *not* considered "reliable." All writers should avoid these. You can certainly read them for general information and insights, but you should not depend on them. Do not use them for your paper, and do not include them in your works cited section. They may indeed *be* reliable, but their reliability cannot be verified and/or it may be tampered with by others:

- Forums—conversations online that are open to anyone
- "Answers" websites—these allow users to post questions and anyone to respond with answers that may or may not be accurate
- Blogs—articles and essays posted on someone's personal website
- Open-source encyclopedias—Wikipedia, etc. (or "Wiki"-anything); The entries for any given subject are often excellent and clearly sourced; however, because they can be written or altered by non-experts, they are not reliable.
- Articles by armchair enthusiasts—These may not be blog posts; instead, they may be posted by a self-styled expert on a website that doesn't have professional connections to the topic. The article may indeed be excellent and well-researched, but if the writer has no credentials that prove true expertise, then pass it up.
- Teacher lessons—Many teachers post lessons and other teaching resources online. These may or may not be reliable. If you cannot verify that the teacher is an expert on the topic or is offering material from a verifiable expert, then pass it by.
- Study aid websites—These are designed to assist with homework and are great tools for that purpose... but not for research papers. (Schmoop, Gradesaver, SparkNotes, etc.)

What, then, is a reliable source? Generally, you can use these with confidence:

- Major encyclopedias, such as Britannica or World—*but these are very general and should be used sparingly* in a research paper.
- Websites that specialize in an area, such as museums and major magazines, and which use verifiable experts as their writers—Smithsonian, National Geographic, etc.
- Books, articles, and essays written by credentialed experts, first-hand witnesses, or people with first-hand experience
- Publications and audio-visual media that were *not* self-produced—While you will not always be able to tell by the cover, you should always follow up on any doubts by checking out the publisher or producer online. Self-produced work will often look less professional than those produced by real publishing companies, which publish works from a variety of authors. Of course, if the author has credentials such as a doctorate degree or firsthand experience in the subject, you may be able to use a self-produced product. You do need to be careful with these, however. Self-published books are like websites in that anyone can produce them without being held accountable for mistakes.
- Professional journals—these are magazines produced specifically by and for experts in a field of study as a way of sharing knowledge and new research.
- Living experts, such as working professionals in the field you are researching, or witnesses willing to provide firsthand accounts—these, again, are valuable primary sources

No matter how hard you try, you may still fall prey to inaccurate information as you research. You cannot know if you are recording false information in your paper, so the best way to ensure that your paper is as accurate as possible is to study and take notes on as many sources as you can find. Three or four sources may work for a 1-2 page paper, but this is not enough for a longer paper! The more sources you use to research a topic or sub-topic, the better chance you have of accuracy.

ASSIGNMENT: Find six reliable sources on a subject that interests you. They may be print or digital sources, or they may be living witnesses or experts. Record the *title, author, and*

location (or the name and credentials* on the topic, if a living person) in your writing notebook. Then tell why each is “reliable.” When you’re finished, you can scan your paper or type it into a Google Doc.

*According to the dictionary, “credential” means “a qualification, achievement, personal quality, or aspect of a person’s background, typically when used to indicate that they are suitable for something.”