

# Writing and Tutorial Center

---

## Evaluating Sources with a Critical Eye

Providing citations in scholarly research is a fundamental aspect of being able to report and provide further ideas (reactions) to concepts that are not your own. Citing allows authors to provide support to their arguments while letting readers know that they are giving credit to another author. Citations allow writers to acknowledge someone else's authority and provide insight that they can expand upon after providing relevant evidence. It also **establishes credibility** from experts in a range of scholarly fields. It is important to note that providing citations also lets an audience know the information is coming from somewhere else, doesn't belong to the author of the paper, and removes the risks of accusations of plagiarism. These sources allow readers to see your process as a researcher, establish the logic behind your arguments, provide a sense of legitimacy, and allow others to reference them.

### WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PRIMARY SOURCES AND SECONDARY SOURCES?

A primary source is an original document, or other media, created at the time of an event. They usually provide a firsthand account of an event by someone directly involved.

EXAMPLES

News Stories with Firsthand Accounts  
Autobiographies  
Interviews  
Oral Histories  
Speeches  
Legal Texts

Raw Statistics / Surveys  
Letters / Diaries  
Literature / Poetry  
Artworks / Photographs  
Audio / Video of an Event  
Artifacts / Physical Objects

Secondary sources are documents or other media that have been created after a specific event.

EXAMPLES

Reports About an Event Years Later  
Biographies  
Journal Articles  
Textbooks  
Encyclopedias / Dictionaries

Interpretations  
Analyses by Others  
Reviews  
Criticisms  
Documentaries

### WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PEER-REVIEWED AND NON-ACADEMIC SOURCES?

Peer-reviewed sources are usually found in academic journals. They go through an editing and evaluatory process to ensure the information provided is accurate and based on factual evidence. An author of a paper needs to submit it to a panel of experts (peers) to confirm the validity of the work. Once the peer group reads and evaluates the submission, they will ask the original author to make necessary changes if they found any factual discrepancies with the writing. The essay is only published after this process and all members of the review group consider the information to be based in fact, and follows guidelines established by the academic journal and a specific field. These essays are considered to be the strongest examples to use in scholarly research papers due to the scrutiny essays go through before they are published for public consumption. They are accompanied with a bibliography for audiences to further evaluate sources used within the paper.

Non-academic sources are pieces of writing that do not go through a peer-review process. Often, they do not include bibliographies to check the validity of presented information. Examples of these sources are magazine and newspaper articles, blog posts, and social media accounts. These writings require more scrutiny because they have not gone through such a vetting process as described in the peer review process above. There are many great non-academic sources out there, but check with your professor before adding them to your essay.

## USING WIKIPEDIA FOR RESEARCH: THE PROS

Wikipedia can be excellent for getting a general understanding of a subject, especially when you're just beginning your research. Articles often link to related concepts, making it easier to explore how ideas are connected across disciplines. Wikipedia entries can reflect recent developments with up-to-date information, which is useful for topics that evolve quickly (e.g. technology, current events). Wikipedia articles are also full of helpful references and external links, and the "References" and "Further Reading" sections can point you to scholarly books, articles, and reliable websites that you can cite. Wikipedia articles also use accessible language. Content is typically written in clear, straightforward language—this is great for building foundational understanding before diving into more complex texts.

However, there are plenty of reasons why someone should be careful when using Wikipedia for research.

## USING WIKIPEDIA FOR RESEARCH: THE CONS

There is, of course, a lack of scholarly rigor. Wikipedia is not peer-reviewed or curated by experts in the same way that academic journals or books are. This means the content might contain errors or oversimplifications. Anyone can edit Wikipedia, which introduces the risk of vandalism, misinformation, or unverified claims—especially on controversial or trending topics. There is also variable article quality. Some entries are well-researched and cited; others are incomplete, poorly sourced, or biased. There's no consistent standard across all topics.

Most instructors and academic institutions do not accept Wikipedia as a valid source in research papers or formal assignments. It is not an acceptable citation. However, it can be a valuable place to begin your research, especially in early stages of forming research topics and ideas.

You may start with Wikipedia, but don't stop there. Only use it to build background knowledge and develop research questions. Use the reference list to find possibly credible academic sources you can cite in your paper. Always cross-check facts with library databases, scholarly articles, and books. Visit the Pratt library; they will be more than happy to help you with this! To sum it up, use Wikipedia wisely, critically, and as a springboard to more authoritative material.

## CONCERNS ABOUT USING BIASED SOURCES IN RESEARCH

Some sources may be biased because they are influenced by the author's personal opinions, political agendas, or financial interests. Others may present selective information to persuade or appeal to a specific audience rather than to inform objectively. Biased sources may include inaccurate, exaggerated, or selectively reported information, leading you to unknowingly spread false or misleading claims. Using such sources can lead you to present one-sided or unbalanced arguments, weakening your analysis and making your work appear less objective. Relying on sources with an obvious agenda or lack of evidence can undermine your academic credibility and cause readers (including professors) to question your conclusions.

### How to Avoid This:

- Use peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and reliable news sources.
- Evaluate sources for author credentials, publication purpose, and tone.
- Cross-check facts and include multiple perspectives in your work.