

## SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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### Introduction

There is more information available now than in the entire history of humanity, and the amount is still growing. The challenge then becomes finding the right information to meet your needs. So, where do you look? This handout discusses the different types of information sources to at least point you in the right direction as you begin your search.

### Primary & Secondary Sources

Two main categories of information sources are primary sources and secondary sources. A primary source is an original work created by a person who was directly involved in the subject of the work. Primary sources give you first-hand information. Your instructors will usually want you to use primary sources for your assignments.

Primary sources include things like:

- Diaries
- Letters
- Works of fiction
- Autobiographies
- Art objects
- Research articles written by those who performed the research
- Artifacts
- Data
- Interviews
- Blog posts
- Email messages
- Newspaper article written by a reporter who witnessed the event

Secondary sources are works about primary sources. They analyze, critique, report, summarize, interpret or somehow restructure an original work. Secondary sources are useful for getting an overview of a topic. The references found in secondary sources can also help you find primary sources. In many cases, the papers you write will be secondary sources.

Secondary sources can be things like:

- Textbooks
- Book reviews
- Biographies
- Articles about other people's work

### Books

Books will be one of the main types of sources you'll use for your research.

Books typically:

- Provide in-depth coverage of a topic
- Puts topics on context with related topics
- Are written by experts in the field
- May contain historical information about the topic

## **Periodicals**

Periodicals are another main source of information for your assignments.

### **What is a periodical?**

Periodicals are materials that are published at regular intervals, such as daily, weekly, monthly or yearly. Because periodicals are published so frequently, they tend to include the most up-to-date information. Examples include newspapers, magazines and journals.

### **Types of periodicals**

The different types of periodicals have different characteristics and are used to find different types of information.

### **Newspapers**

Characteristics of newspapers include:

- Usually published daily
- Good source of local and regional news and current events
- Good source of coverage of events as they happen and unfold
- Often contain editorials, classified ads, sports scores and entertainment information
- Written by journalists
- Audience is the general public
- Sources rarely documented

Examples include the New York Times, Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle and The Eagle

### **Popular Magazines**

Characteristics of popular magazines include:

- Articles about current news, events and popular culture
- Written by journalists
- Audience is the general public
- Sources rarely documented

Examples include Newsweek, Time, Ebony, Good Housekeeping and People

### **Trade Journals & Magazines**

Characteristics of trade journals and magazines include:

- Articles about current trends, news and events in a particular field
- Written by practitioners and experts in the field
- Audience is practitioners in the field, uses jargon of the field
- Sources are often cited, but may not provide full documentation

Examples include Variety, InfoWorld, Restaurant Report, Chronicle of Higher Education and Health Facilities Management

## **Scholarly Journals**

Characteristics of scholarly journals include:

- Reports original research and in-depth analysis of issues related to the discipline
- Written by scholars and researchers in the discipline
- Audience is scholars, researchers and students
- Uses scholarly language and jargon of the discipline
- Are usually peer-reviewed
- Includes full documentation of sources

Examples include the Journal of Biochemistry, Journal of the American Medical Association, Plasma Physics and Critical Perspectives on Accounting

## **Internet**

### **What is the Internet?**

The Internet is essentially made up of millions of computers all over the world that are linked together in a network that allows people to exchange information. What follows is a brief introduction.

### **What's on the Internet?**

There are entire books; scholarly journal articles; magazine articles; newspaper articles; video; feature length movies; music; games; software you can download; self-help; shopping; gambling; sports scores; opportunities to interact with others using email, chat, and live voice and video; and lots of other information on the Internet. If something can be digitized, there is a good chance you can find it on the Internet.

### **Why use the Internet?**

With all the information available on the Internet, you would think it would be a good source of information for your research. Well, it is.

Benefits of using the Internet as an information source include:

- Lots of information from all over the world
- Access to the "invisible web", which includes peer-reviewed scholarly articles from experts, newspaper articles, and other data.
- Live and recorded video. Actually see what happened from a primary source.
- Live and recorded audio. Hear what happened from a primary sources, such as in an interview.
- Provides more recent, up to date information, including up to the minute updates. For example, reporters can sit in criminal and civil trials and post blog entries about the trial as it is actually taking place.

There are also some disadvantages of using the Internet as a source of information:

- Lots of information from all over the world. There is a lot of information to sift through, making it difficult and time consuming to find what you need.
- Anyone with a computer and Internet access can put information on the Internet. Just because information is on the Internet does not make it true. Make sure the information is from a reputable, qualified source before you use it in your assignments. The Evaluating Information module covers this topic in more detail.

- The Internet primarily contains relatively recent information. If you need more historical information, you are likely to find it in print resources and from specialized library databases that provide access to digitized historical information.

### **Librarians**

Librarians are also a great source of information. Although you probably won't cite them as a source in your assignments, they can help you find the sources that you will cite.

### **Library Service Desks**

- Get help identifying the right tools to find information
- Get help using the tools
- Consult with librarians who specialize in different academic disciplines for more in-depth research needs

### **Subject Guides**

Librarians who specialize in different subject areas have created Web pages called subject guides to help you find information. These pages provide links to online journals and library databases, and recommend books and other resources for doing research in specific academic disciplines.

Move your mouse pointer over the Help tab on the Library's Web site and then click Subject Guides. Click a subject area based on your research topic. You can also click the Subjects (History, Chemistry, etc) link on the Library's home page.

### **Class Guides**

Librarians also work with your instructors to create class guides. Class guides are Web pages that provide links to online journals and article databases, and recommend books and other resources to help you complete assignments for specific classes. Not all classes have class guides, but they can be created upon request.

Move your mouse pointer over the Help tab on the Library's Web site and then click Class Guides. Click a subject area based on your research topic. You can also click the Class Guides link on the Library's home page.