



# Choosing Sources

## How Do I... Undergraduate Research Guides

Part of the "Evaluate My Sources" Series

### In this guide you will learn how to:

- Decide which type of source you need for your research
- Find more information on evaluating the sources you choose
- Where to go for help

## Is this the source I need? How to know if a source is right for you.

Once you've determined whether or not a source is scholarly, you must go a step further and determine if it's a source that you need to use in your paper. This is not always self-evident, and can involve a lot of aggravation. The following tips, we hope, may save you some time.

### General criteria

Basically, when choosing sources to include in your paper, you are looking for sources that do one of the following:

- Support your argument
- Provide background information on your topic
- Provide contrary views you can take issue with in your paper
- Have reliable statistical data, timelines, and other information

To make any of these decisions you need to have some idea of what your paper will discuss in the first place. Check out our guides to Getting Started:

<http://www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl/howdoi/how.html#start>

Remember, however, that the research process is seldom linear. You may even find yourself altering your argument in the final stages of writing. Almost certainly, you will not initially find the sources or answers you expect to find--it takes time and patience. If you're getting frustrated or have any questions at all, don't hesitate to ask a librarian (find ways to contact one to the left of this paragraph). In the meantime, try the tips on the other side of this handout.

### Need More Help? Ask a Librarian!

Website:  
[www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl](http://www.library.uiuc.edu/ugl)

Screen Name:  
askundergrad

Fall and Spring Hours:  
Open Sunday 10am-  
Close Friday 10pm  
(24 hours)  
Saturday 10am-10pm

Reference Hours:  
Sun-Thurs: 10am-Midnight  
Friday & Saturday:  
10am-10pm

Phone:  
Reference: 217.333.8589  
Info Services: 217.333.3477



# Criteria for Choosing the Best Source:

## Books

- This may seem obvious, but use the table of contents--it's there for a reason! Does this look like a work that engages with your research questions?
- Check the index for important terms and names (see the guide, *Developing Your Topic*, for keyword tips).
- Browse the bibliography or list of works cited (usually before the index at the end of the text, or at the end of chapters in an edited collection). Does this work seem to cite sources that are also relevant? If so, track them down--even books that aren't perfect for your topic (too general, for instance) may lead you to better sources.

## Articles

- Read the abstract. Especially if you found the article through one of our article databases, there will almost always be an abstract, or a brief description of the information contained in the article. Does the distilled argument here match your interests?
- You probably don't have to read every word of the article, certainly not at first glance. So read the introduction and get an idea of the direction the author is taking. Then ask the question again: will this help you answer your research question?
- If you're working with an online article, use your computer's FIND function (hold down the ctrl key--command/clover leaf key on Macs--and then press F) to locate key words or phrases in the article. Read around the important phrases for context. Is this author taking the issue in a direction that connects with your own ideas and questions?
- For tips on evaluating quality, see the guide, *Is It Scholarly?*

## Web pages

Most important here is to make sure you've carefully evaluated the site for reliability and quality.

- Who is publishing or sponsoring the page?
- Strip back the URL to discover the source of the page.
- Is contact information for the author/publisher provided?
- How recently was the page updated?
- Be particularly wary of bias when viewing web pages. Anyone can create a web page about any topic. YOU must verify the validity of the information.
- For more specific guidelines in evaluating web pages see the guide, *Evaluating Internet Sources*

**Check out other How Do I... Guides in this series, Evaluate My Sources:**

- **Is It Scholarly?**
- **Evaluating Internet Sources**