

# Finding Credible Sources

*“You are entitled to your own opinions: you are not entitled to your own facts.”*

- Daniel Patrick Moynihan

During your time in school, you will probably spend lots of time researching. Without research, all of the work done in the classroom and indeed the whole academic world would have no foundation. *Research is what separates fact from opinion.* At the heart of every paper and research project are credible sources.

## What is a credible source?

In the context of academic research, a *credible source* is one that is supported by evidence and is trusted by the academic community. It is important for your research to be credible, otherwise your work may be built on wrong or illegitimate information.

## Where can I find credible sources?

As a rule of thumb, good places to find credible sources include the following:

- Materials published within at least the last 10 years (sometimes sooner; see Currency section below);
- Peer-reviewed articles and books written by qualified authors with citations;
- Websites registered by government and educational institutions (.gov, .edu, .ac);
- Academic databases (i.e. *Academic Search Premier, JSTOR, the Ames Library Database* browser)
- Our Academic Librarians: schedule a consultation with them to get the best help you can on finding credible, useful research.

Places to avoid include:

- out-of-date materials (published over 10 years ago);
- posts from social networks (i.e. Facebook);
- blogs;
- research articles without citations;
- websites ending in .com, .org, .net etc.

## Note on Wikipedia and other “open” sources:

Wikipedia is not a credible source for academic research because it is an open website, available to be edited by anyone. **However**, well-written Wikipedia articles will often have

citations below to actual peer-reviewed books and articles, which can be helpful if you need a jumping-off point to start searching.

**In addition:**

Sometimes, the nature of a research project may require you to look at unconventional sources. **Whenever in doubt, *talk to your teacher or professor* about what they consider acceptable for a given research project.**

**How can I tell for myself what is credible?**

There are many ways to determine whether a source is legitimate, and they can vary by the type of media. However, most of the criteria are universal for any source. You have to ask yourself: Is this CRAAP?

The **CRAAP test** is a test you can use to determine whether a source is valid for your research. It is an acronym and the letters are as follows:

**C is for Currency:** How *current* is the information?

- Check when the information was published. If this information is not available, it may not be the best source for you.
- Also important is if the information is up-to-date. For fields like the hard sciences, some discoveries can cause change very quickly, and something from five years ago can be out of date today. For fields in the social sciences and humanities like history or philosophy, the subject matter itself can be hundreds of years old, but scholarship on these topics continues to evolve.
- Generally, newer is better with sources as the newest material may contain new information that might disprove or refute older sources.

**R is for Relevance:** is this information actually *useful*?

- All sources need to relate to the topic at hand in some way, and contribute to answering the questions you pose in your research project, even if just as a footnote. Otherwise, the source is superfluous.
- You must also determine the intended audience of the source. If you are a philosophy major, and your source is a journal of philosophy, it may be heavy with terms that are familiar to you, but not to people outside of that field.
- Be cognizant of your own audience, too; if your research is meant to be presented to the average person, you may have to change the language to get your point across, but if your work is shared only with your professor, that may not be the case. Be sure to look at multiple sources before proceeding. Even articles in the same journal can vary widely in formality and style. Some may be better for your purposes than others.

**The first A is for Authority:** *Where* did the source come from?

- Look not just for the author, but also the sponsoring organization (publisher, journal, etc.). If neither of these are given, you should be skeptical.

- Most academic journals have a diligent review process, but sometimes fake papers (and fake authors) can slip through. Try to find the author's credentials. Are they qualified by a recognized body in the subject they are writing on?
- Stick to professional sources who have been recognized as such. Just as you wouldn't trust an unlicensed surgeon to perform an operation, you should not trust your research with sources from an author you can't verify.

The **second A** is for **Accuracy**: Is the information *correct*?

- Check to see if the information is backed up by evidence for its claims. In academic sources, that also means checking for *peer review*. Peer review means that a source has been reviewed and confirmed by other authorities in the same field, and thus holds general validity in the community.
- If a source is not peer reviewed, it could still be correct, but you should exercise more caution; the findings have yet to be verified or replicated.
- Once again, the best thing to do is to look at other sources for cross referencing; if you can find the same information verified across multiple different sources, then it is more likely to be correct than not.
- Another tip is to check for spelling and grammar errors; a source with lots of simple mistakes was probably not reviewed at all and stinks of unprofessionalism, and is probably best left alone.

**P** is for **Purpose**: *Why* was the source created?

- Is the source meant to persuade? Advertise? Condemn? These purposes may influence the nature of the source and add bias.
- It is vital that you check for bias in your sources. Does the author make their purpose and intention clear and avoid bias? Or do they use emotionally-charged language and present opinions as fact without evidence?
- You must also consider the various cultural, political, or individual biases the author may hold. Everyone has bias, but good authors strive to remove their bias from academic sources and rely solely on facts and evidence to prove their arguments.
- You should also try to remain unbiased as you look at your sources. You may not always agree with the arguments being presented, but that doesn't necessarily make the source invalid. Multiple arguments can be made from different interpretations of the same facts. The problem arises when a biased source fabricates facts to suit their narrative, such as in dishonest advertising or political propaganda.