

FINDING RELEVANT AND RELIABLE SOURCES

You will probably find more sources than you can use, and you should always evaluate their relevance and reliability.

A relevant source includes (1) data you can use as evidence, (2) discussions of matters you plan to discuss, and/or (3) arguments that show you how others are thinking about your question. **To find out if a source is relevant**, skim the key parts of the text for names or terms related to your question or its answers. The key parts of a text are usually any section or chapter titled “introduction” or “conclusion,” any subheadings or chapter titles, and the first paragraph or two after each after subheading or chapter title.

Also, your evidence will not be persuasive if it comes from a source your readers don’t trust. You can’t judge a source until you read it, but there are signs of reliability. **To find out if a source is reliable**, consider whether you found it in a library’s collections or whether it seems like a work of high enough quality to be in a library.

Evaluating Online Sources

Use particular care in evaluating the reliability of online sources. Look for the following signs of a reliable source:

1. It is associated with a reputable organization, university, journal, or publisher.
2. It does not present only one side of a contested political or social issue or appear to be selling something.
3. It does not use abusive language or make errors of spelling, punctuation, or grammar.
4. It says who is responsible for the site and when it was updated. If it has no date, be cautious.
5. It is not too glossy. When a site has more decorative graphics than words, its designers may care more about drawing you in than about presenting reliable information. If a site has almost no graphics, that may be a sign of neglect, but it might also indicate that its creator cares more about the quality of the words than the look of the page.

Trust an online source only if careful readers would trust those who maintain it. If you don’t know who maintains it, be skeptical.