Choosing & Using Sources: A Guide to Academic Research

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13-Roles of Research Sources
Thinking About Roles of Sources

Knowing how to use your “players” effectively improves the outcome. (Image source: Scott Stuart)

Does this nightmare sound like how you feel every time you have to write a term paper?

Your team is playing in the big game and you’re the coach. (Maybe the real coach missed the plane. Who knows—it’s a nightmare!) The stakes are high. You know your players are good athletes—you have access to the best and plenty of them. But you don’t really know good strategies of the game, so you don’t quite know how to use your players. For instance, is it better to keep your quarterback fresh by substituting often? Your kicker is not as bulky as your tackles. Is that typical of good kickers or should you find somebody else? And what about your linemen—can they tackle as well as block?

What makes this a nightmare is not knowing how to use your players in a high-pressure game. Unfortunately, that situation is similar to writing a term paper if all you know are directions like these:

Your paper must be in 12 pt. font, Times New Roman, double spaced with no more than 1” margins, and include a minimum of 8 total articles comprised of:

- At least 2 peer-review articles
So you know you need sources. But directions like those aren’t much help with what to actually **do** with the sources in your paper. Even with credible sources, it’s very difficult to write a persuasive paper until you learn the roles that sources play—how you can use them—within your paper.

But who said anything about a **persuasive** paper? Perhaps one of the things you don’t know is that with most term papers and essays, the **unstated expectation** is that you will use your sources to make an argument. That’s because most scholarly writing makes an argument. You will be arguing that your answer to your research question (your thesis) is correct, or at least reasonable.

Obviously, it’s high time someone helped you learn all this!

For both professionals and student researchers, successful scholarly writing uses sources to fill various roles within the term paper, journal article, book, poster, essay, or other assignment.

Those roles all have to do with rhetoric—the art of making a convincing argument. Putting your sources to work for you in these roles can help you write in a more powerful, persuasive way—to, in fact, win your argument.

**TIP:**

For another way to think about choosing the right sources for your needs, see *Sources and Information Needs*.

**NOTE:**

This section on rhetorical roles of research sources was influenced by many sources. See the *bibliography*. 
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role for Sources</th>
<th>How to Use Them</th>
<th>Kinds of Sources That Can Have That Role*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background</strong></td>
<td>Writers rely on these sources for general factual information. For instance, a writer could use background information to introduce a setting, situation, or problem in the term paper.</td>
<td>Usually secondary sources and tertiary sources, but, basically, just anything other than journal articles that report original research. Some examples: literature review articles, non-fiction books, and biographies (secondary) and field guides and Wikipedia (tertiary).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Exhibits or Evidence</strong></td>
<td>Writers interpret and analyze sources like these in the same way they are used as exhibits and evidence in a museum or a court.</td>
<td>Usually primary sources. Some examples: newspaper articles from the time in question, works of literature or art, and research articles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Argument</strong></td>
<td>Writers engage with these sources that they agree with or disagree with. The sources are usually written by scholars in their field. For instance, writers often include sources that describe earlier work that is specifically relevant to their own research question and their thesis (what they consider to be the answer to that question.)</td>
<td>Usually primary and secondary sources. Some examples of primary sources: research articles in the sciences and humanities and recordings of performances in the arts. Some examples of secondary sources: commentaries and criticisms, such as those that appear in literature reviews, textbooks, and blogs that comment on research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Method or Theory</strong></td>
<td>Writers follow the key terms, concepts, or manner of working that are explained in these sources. That is, they pay attention to and use the relevant work of others before them to carry out their own work and then describe it in the term paper.</td>
<td>Often secondary sources. Some examples: literature reviews, textbooks, and blogs that comment on research.</td>
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</table>

**BEAM: A Solution That Might Shine**

This table, created from the ideas developed by Joseph Bizup, describes the roles that sources can play (some of the ways they can be used) in your finished assignment, such as a term paper. Bizup called his model BEAM, an acronym that stands for background, exhibits (or evidence), argument, and method.

*See Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

**See Background Reading

**TIP: BEAM at a Glance**

Download this BEAM Reference Chart to help you quickly determine how you might find or use a source.
Using BEAM: An Example

Using sources to function in these roles is how you enter into the scholarly conversation with all the other research and writing that has covered your topic before.

In the next few pages, you'll learn more about each role by analyzing how sources are used in the pop culture essay cited in the Example below. Seeing how the essay’s author puts his sources to work in their various roles should help you envision how you can do the same in your own papers. The essay discusses how pop culture affects American (and global) values.

EXAMPLE: Manufacturing Taste

Click on the citation below to skim through the essay. When you are finished, come back to this page and begin the next section on background sources.


BEAM: Background Sources

These are sources that should be noncontroversial—the author accepts information from these sources as being authoritative (and expects readers to, as well). In other words, the sources (and the information gleaned from them) are generally trusted or undisputed. That information can serve as the incontestable foundation for your claims.

Background information is common knowledge (e.g. the sky is blue) and not necessary to be cited.

It’s recommended that you cite background sources when you’re unsure, but one rule of thumb suggests finding the same undocumented information in at least 5 other credible sources. It can be difficult to make this determination, so it’s always a good idea to consult your professor.

Let’s look at a statement in the first paragraph of the pop culture essay:

Thus, the corporate giants of the American Culture Industry (themselves now mostly multinational conglomerates) clearly must pay attention to the demands of audiences around the world in formulating, producing, and promoting the specific films, television, music, and other artifacts that are the stuff of popular culture.

How do you know that the “corporate giants are mostly multinational conglomerates” as stated in the first sentence? Or that the items listed are indeed the stuff of popular culture? These are examples of common knowledge.
Looking a little deeper…

Without context, this paragraph could also be the conclusion of a paper about what corporations should do (demonstrating the ongoing nature of knowledge itself). But the paper is not about making recommendations to the American Cultural Industry. This is an assertion that the author uses to help set up his different argument and is meant to be taken at face-value. So it’s an example of how the same source can play different roles in different written assignments—all depending on how writers use them.

There is more about background sources at Getting Background Reading.

**ACTIVITY: Background Sources**

Which of the following would be the best example of a background source that doesn’t need to be cited, according to the BEAM framework?

- There were a total of 39 delegates who signed the U.S. Constitution; William Jackson was the 40th, but served as secretary and did not represent a state.

- Thought to be limited to bat populations, the fungi responsible for the fast-spreading disease known as White-nose syndrome has been linked with similar infections affecting amphibians.

- Having published over 300 reports since 2000, the Pew Internet & American Life Project has been a trusted source for research into online behavior.

**Our Answer:** There were a total of 39 delegates who signed the U.S. Constitution; William Jackson was the 40th, but served as secretary and did not represent a state.

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**BEAM: Exhibit and Evidence Sources**

Generally, exhibit and evidence sources are works of literature (or other media), collected data, or some observed phenomenon, etc. that you have been asked to write about. They are what you analyze or interpret.

Looking again at the pop culture essay, the exhibits being examined are pop culture and American (as well as global) values. Specifically, the essay is examining the relationship between the two:

- On the other hand, the international success of Toy Story 3, a film that deals with anthropomorphized toys and is thus essentially a consumerist fantasy of commodities come to life, also suggests that global distribution of the products of the American Culture Industry is beginning to have an impact on the tastes and values of audiences even outside the United States.

Exhibit sources are not limited to examples in the humanities; they could also be data that was collected
BEAM: Argument Sources

Argument sources provide you with the other voices in the academic conversation about your topic. Who else has done similar research, and how should your paper respond to what they’ve said? Does your paper refine or extend an existing hypothesis someone else has tested? If so, those sources belong in your paper.

Sometimes the purpose of including an argument source is to disagree with it and definitively indicate a different direction.

From our pop culture essay example:

Althusser’s work remains compelling, despite the fact that theorists such as Michel de Certeau and John Fiske have argued that individuals actually have a considerable ability to resist and oppose the messages conveyed to them by official ideology, in popular culture and elsewhere.

The author is taking part and taking a stand in the ongoing scholarly discussion of culture, although this endorsement of Althusser’s work could possibly be considered a method source if the argument in the article went in a different direction.

ACTIVITY: Argument Sources

Which of the follow best defines an argument source in the BEAM framework?

- It’s one piece of research or scholarship that your paper is directly responding to.
- It’s one of many voices in a larger conversation that your research paper participates in.
- It’s one of several articles whose authors disagree with the premises of your paper.

Our Answer: It’s one of many voices in a larger conversation that your research paper participates in.

BEAM: Method Sources

While argument sources help you frame your paper within the larger scholarly discussion about your topic and exhibits provide a focal point, method sources help provide underlying and sometimes implicit assumptions for your argument or analysis.

For some research, these are literally the methods you use to collect data like a focus group or a
particular statistical analysis, and they provide justification for them. In other research, your paper might reveal a leaning toward a major attitude or school of thought within a discipline.

As a persuasive piece of writing, the essay has this intrinsic thread of caution and warning that is summed up in its conclusion:

“The children's film industry might not be quite as sinister as the tobacco industry, with its efforts to addict children to cigarettes. […] Meanwhile, the lives of those audiences are now being increasingly saturated by popular culture, making it more and more difficult for individuals to form attitudes, opinions, and values that are independent of the messages promulgated by the Culture Industry.”

While this is a subtle example, you would generally cite or at least credit your methods and theories that frame your analysis in your bibliography.
You’ve just learned about the various roles sources can play in written material. In this section you’ll gain practice identifying roles that other writers have used them for and then be asked to examine your own past work.

**ACTIVITY: A Reading Exercise**


Read the abstract and passages below and identify the most likely role (background, exhibit, argument, or method) each featured source is playing in Lesy’s article. See our take on each below:

**ABSTRACT:** The article reports on visual literacy and the psychological aspects of photography. The author offers his opinions on the complexities of photographs and reports on the various levels of meaning behind picture taking. Particular attention is given to the psychological aspects of photography and photographers. Additional article topics include the importance of historical photographs, the impact of the Internet and digital media on the profession, as well as the importance of preserving photographs.

**Passage 1**

Solving one scholarly problem – the need to sort out an image’s multiple meanings – opens a clear view of others. No matter how mundane, utilitarian, or circumscribed a photograph’s origins may be, an image is not a sentence. Images are forms of sensory data, processed by the right brain. No matter how judicious and objective a historian fancies herself, a photograph will elicit projections and associations in her, stir her imagination, before she even notices what is happening to her. A photograph “is a function, an experience, not a thing,” said Minor White, a mid-twentieth-century photographer whom Walt Whitman would have recognized as a fellow poet. “Cameras are far more impartial than their owners and employers,” White went on to say. “Projection and empathy [are] natural attributes in man…the photograph invariably functions as a mirror of at least some part of the viewer.” SOURCE CITED: Minor White, “Equivalence: The Perennial Trend,” PSA Journal, 29 July 1963), 17. 20.

**Passage 2**

The problem is not that there are too few images, but too many. Historical photographs exist in huge numbers, in well-ordered collections, presided over by knowledgeable curators. More and more of the collections are being digitized. Overload and saturation are only a mouse click away.

One example: in the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress there are 164,000 black-and-white photographs made between 1935 and 1945 by photographers employed by the Farm Security Administration and the Office of War Information.

Our Answer:
The source referred to in Passage 1 is probably a background source. The author is offering White’s definition as fact. It helps support one of the author’s assertions about the nature of photographs.

The source referred to in Passage 2 is an exhibit source. The author is using the Library of Congress’s photographic archive as a self-evident example to support the claim that information overload is a potential problem.

Now you’re ready to do role identification in a term paper you’ve already written yourself. (In the future, it may be helpful to do the same as a last check on term papers you are about to turn in.)

ACTIVITY: Self-Check

Directions: Re-read your term paper. (If you’ve already gotten feedback from your professor on this paper, also look to see whether any of that feedback applies to the roles you gave your sources.) Then consider the questions below. If you can’t answer “Yes” to every question, reconsider how you have used the sources in your paper.

Do My Sources Have the Right Roles?

• Have I used background information to, for instance, introduce a setting, situation, or problem in the paper or essay?
• Did I cite/not cite the background information appropriately?
• Did I avoid using journal articles that report original research for my background information?
• Did I interpret and analyze sources as though they are exhibits or evidence in my argument?
• Were primary sources those that played the role of exhibits and evidence?
• Did I discuss and cite what others have written about my research question?
• Did I include writers who both agree and disagree with what I say is my answer to the research question?
• Did I avoid using tertiary sources to make my argument that my thesis is reasonable?
• Did I make it clear where key terms, concepts, and manner of working that I used in my research were used first by others?
• Were my sources for useful key terms, concepts, and manner of working secondary sources?
Where to Go From Here

Now that you have a better understanding of how sources are used in a paper, check out Academic Argument, which can help you plan and structure your term paper.

If you're interested in further integrating sources into your paper more effectively, check out this OSU Writing Center tutorial on summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting.