Research 101

Evaluating Sources

In this tutorial, you will learn how to:

- Evaluate a source based on the following evaluation criteria:
  - authority
  - audience / purpose
  - accuracy
  - currency

- Distinguish between scholarly, popular, and substantive news sources
- Understand the peer review process

Authority

Questions to ask:
- Who is the author? Who is the publisher?
- What are the author's credentials?
- Is the author affiliated with an educational institution or credible organization?
- Do other books or articles cite the author?

Example:

Authors and publishers may present their ideas in formal (ex. in a peer-reviewed journal article) or informal publications (ex. in a Twitter post). This tweet is from US congressman John Lewis' verified Twitter account. Even an authoritative source can have a point of view or bias that you will want to recognize as you evaluate the source for use in your academic work.
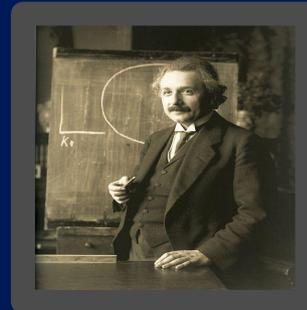
Audience / Purpose

Questions to ask:
- Who is the intended audience for the source? The general public? Researchers?
- Is the info too technical or too basic?
- Is this source created to inform, teach, sell, entertain, or persuade?
- Do the authors/sponsors make their intentions or purpose clear?
- Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal biases?

Example:
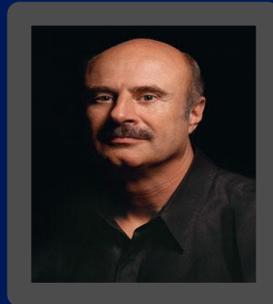
Dr. Phil
Image Credit

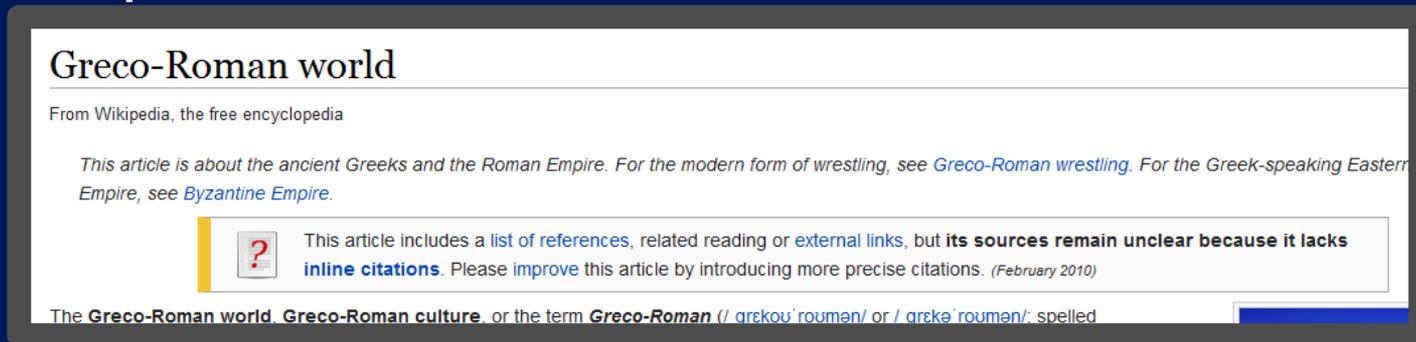

Dr. Al Einstein
Image Credit

Dr. Phil presents his ideas to a popular audience of daytime TV viewers. The purpose of his show is to sell and entertain. Einstein published books and research articles for an audience of fellow and future scientists. The purpose of his work was to contribute new knowledge to his discipline.

Accuracy

Questions to ask:

- Does the author adequately cite sources?
- Does the author's evidence support the claim?
- Is the source well-organized?
- Are there glaring errors in spelling or grammar?
- Was the information reviewed by editors or subject experts before it was published?

Example:

This wikipedia article has been flagged because the content is not adequately supported with citations. A source will typically not be as transparent as this, but you should look for markers of inaccuracy with other criteria, like authority and purpose.

Currency

Currency is particularly important in fields that are rapidly changing, like science, technology, or medicine. Depending on the topic, you may consider historic sources.

Questions to ask:
- When was the information published or last updated? Has it been updated?
- Have newer articles been published on the topic?
- Does your topic require current information, or will older sources work as well?

Example:

Lemur social behavior and primate intelligence
A Jolly - Science, 1966 - sciencemag.org
Abstract Our human intellect has resulted from an enormous leap in capacity above the level of monkeys and apes. Earlier, though, Old and New World monkeys' intelligence outdistanced that of other mammals, including the prosimian primates. This first great ...
Cited by 532   Related articles   All 9 versions   Cite   Save

The source shown here was published in 1966. As a source for a scientific paper, the age of this source is problematic. This screen capture is from a Google Scholar search results page where articles that are highly cited often appear first in the results. Pay attention to how results are displayed and use advanced limiters to filter to current articles.

Scholarly & Popular Sources

In academic research, you will use both scholarly and popular sources. Are all popular sources *bad* and scholarly sources *good*? No! But depending on your assignment, you may be required to use certain types of sources over others.

Popular sources will help you gather general information, news, and popular opinion on a topic. These sources can also be valuable as primary texts for historical research.
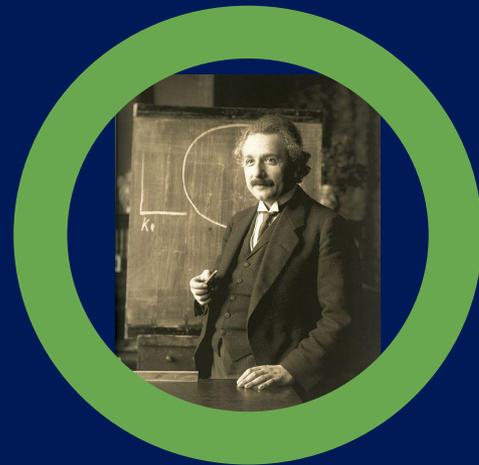
Scholarly sources provide you with original research and in-depth analysis of a topic. In most of your academic work, you will be required to engage with scholarly sources in the discipline or subject area of the course.

Scholarly Sources

Characteristics	Scholarly Sources: Academic journals (Often "peer reviewed" or "refereed")
Content	Articles written for students and scholars; original research or analytical articles in a discipline
Look and Feel	Charts and graphs (sometimes); very few ads and images. Articles usually lengthy (10+ pages) and include list of cited references.
Audience	Scholars and students.
Authority	Articles usually written by researchers and scholars
Editorial Process	Articles evaluated by peer reviewers (scholars) for content, accuracy, originality, and style

Popular Sources

Characteristics	Popular Sources: Magazines and Newspapers
Content	Articles intended for a general/popular audience; easy to understand vocabulary
Look and Feel	Lots of images; includes ads; short articles; no references listed
Audience	General readers
Authority	Journalists or reporters who are not usually experts on the subject
Editorial Process	Articles evaluated for form and content by editors

Substantive News Sources

Evaluation Criteria	Substantive News Sources
Content	Articles intended for an educated audience;
Look and Feel	Images/ads; lengthier articles; references not usually listed, but articles are well-researched
Audience	Educated readers
Authority	Written by journalists, scholars, or freelance editors
Editorial Process	Articles are reviewed by editors, but are not peer reviewed

A hybrid of scholarly and popular, there are lots of *substantive* news articles published in magazines, newspapers, and blogs. These can be excellent sources to use in your academic research. Examples of substantive newspapers and magazines include: The Economist, The New York Times, and Scientific American.

Popular Source: Look and Feel

A popular source usually lists the author, but no credentials are listed.

The articles are typically much shorter than scholarly articles (a few paragraphs or 1-2 pages).

Authors almost never include a list of references in popular sources.
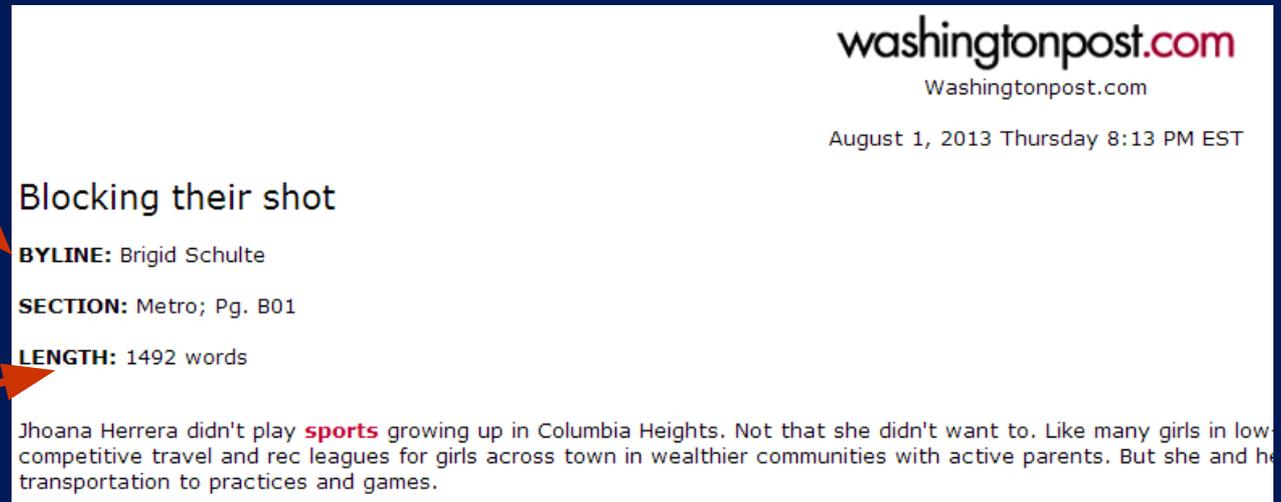
washingtonpost.com
Washingtonpost.com

August 1, 2013 Thursday 8:13 PM EST

Blocking their shot

BYLINE: Brigid Schulte

SECTION: Metro; Pg. B01

LENGTH: 1492 words

Jhoana Herrera didn't play sports growing up in Columbia Heights. Not that she didn't want to. Like many girls in low-competitive travel and rec leagues for girls across town in wealthier communities with active parents. But she and he transportation to practices and games.

Scholarly Source: Look and Feel

A scholarly article usually includes a list of authors with their university credentials.

The article might also include an abstract which is a short summary of the contents of the article.
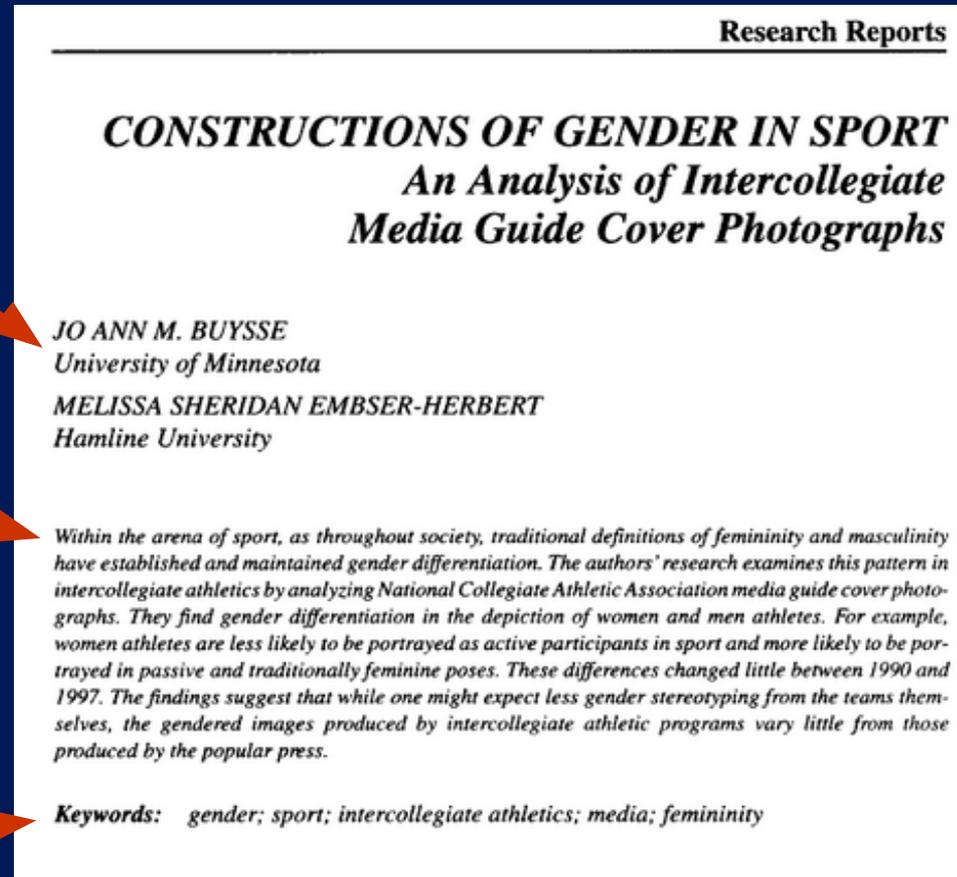
An article may also include author-supplied keywords or subject headings.

Research Reports

CONSTRUCTIONS OF GENDER IN SPORT
An Analysis of Intercollegiate Media Guide Cover Photographs

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Hamline University

Within the arena of sport, as throughout society, traditional definitions of femininity and masculinity have established and maintained gender differentiation. The authors' research examines this pattern in intercollegiate athletics by analyzing National Collegiate Athletic Association media guide cover photographs. They find gender differentiation in the depiction of women and men athletes. For example, women athletes are less likely to be portrayed as active participants in sport and more likely to be portrayed in passive and traditionally feminine poses. These differences changed little between 1990 and 1997. The findings suggest that while one might expect less gender stereotyping from the teams themselves, the gendered images produced by intercollegiate athletic programs vary little from those produced by the popular press.

Keywords: gender; sport; intercollegiate athletics; media; femininity

Scholarly Source: Look and Feel

A scholarly article usually includes discipline-specific or specialized vocabulary.

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Ethnic Minority Rule and Civil War Onset

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Partly hidden beneath the complexities of N* and an attack on the supposedly individualist pre-sumptions of ethnic fractionalization measures, a simple and valuable question lies implicit in Cederman and Girardin's (2007) article (henceforth, CG). Are countries at greater risk of civil war when the state is controlled by an ethnic minority?

Scholars of nationalism have long suggested that this might be the case. In a nationalist age, plurality groups that are excluded from power may feel especially ag-grieved. As Gellner (1983, 1) put it,

Sunni–Alawite control to Alawite dominance—causes the estimate of N*'s impact to nearly vanish.

ETHNOLINGUISTIC FRACTIONALIZATION AND OTHER MEASURES OF ETHNIC DEMOGRAPHY

We agree that it is natural to wonder whether political dominance of an ethnic minority raises civil war risks. But we also believe that it is interesting and important to ask, as we did in Fearon and Laitin (2003a), whether

Scholarly Source: Look and Feel

A scholarly article includes a list of references at the end of the article. This is a goldmine for helping you to find related sources on your topic.

REFERENCES

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Buysse, J. M. 1992. Media constructions of gender difference and hierarchy in sport: An analysis of intercollegiate media guide cover photographs. Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

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Scholarly Sources: Editorial Process

Most **scholarly articles** undergo an editorial process called, "peer review." This means that the article is read and reviewed by peer experts in the field prior to publication.The process is designed to ensure that publications are original, accurate, up-to-date, and relevant to the field of study.

Popular articles are reviewed by magazine and newspaper editors, but they do not go through the rigorous peer review process.

Image credit

Takeaways

- Look for markers of authority, audience, accuracy, and currency in the sources that you choose for your research
- Recognize that there's a lot of gray area when it comes to the "scholarliness" of sources. Depending on your assignment guidelines and the kind of research you are doing, you may consider a wide variety of source types
- Peer review is an editorial vetting process that most researchers go through when publishing journal articles
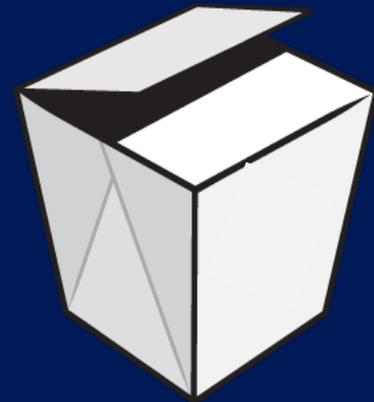
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