IDENTIFYING AND ANALYZING ACADEMIC SOURCES

A SCREENING PROCESS FOR LOCATING GREAT ACADEMIC SOURCES

When researching an Honors Study Topic Theme for an Honors in Action project, members should follow an efficient and effective method for identifying academic sources. Given that not all academic sources are created equal, here are some strategies for conducting research and evaluating sources.

Finding your best academic sources should involve two to three searches and time to review what you find. Once you have found academic sources, read them and take notes about why the sources are important to your research. That way, you will have the notes for drawing research conclusions and writing bibliographical annotations.

PRELIMINARIES

After determining your chapter's theme and research question, organize key words of your research question into appropriate search terms.

Example: The sample research question on page 29 of the guide is the following:

> *Theme 4: Expressions of Truth*
>
> *How might students evaluate the inherited body of knowledge around climate change to create a legacy of information literacy for future students?*
>
> *Possible Initial Search Terms: climate change, opposition to climate change, global warming*

These terms can be searched via your library's databases and resources. Remember, research librarians can help you as you search for academic sources. On the web, try Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com/) to search for scholarly and legal sources.

In the example provided, students might also look for specific scientists or universities whose faculty argue for or against climate change.

FIRST SEARCH: TYPE AND RELEVANCY OF ACADEMIC SOURCES

Type
For your first search, use the initial search terms created by your HIA team and review them for both the types of texts found and their relevance. Texts can be classified traditionally as primary or secondary sources, or, more currently, within the context of multimodality.

What is multimodality?
Multimodality is a theory of communication and learning that organizes knowledge into five distinct learning modes (semiotic groups): textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual. Multimodal educators and researchers may use two or more modes in conducting research or in teaching and learning processes. Multimodality is inclusive of cultural, linguistic, communicative, and technological diversity in the world. As communication practices have changed drastically over the past 20 years, it is desirable, even necessary, to think of using more than written materials for academic research purposes. Progressively, there is a need to compose materials in formats that are accessible to all learning styles.

The following graphic provides examples of multimodal research tools. This graphic is not exhaustive. You may note that the references provided both online and in the Honors Program Guide include several different modes.

Textual	Written words as in books, articles, novels, advertisements
Aural	Speeches, podcasts, videos, audiobooks, music, storytelling
Linguistic	Interviews, focus groups, spoken word, speeches, books
Spatial	Dance, storytelling (gestures), graphic novels, posters
Visual	Images, media, maps, documentaries, live performances, animation

The discussion that follows applies generally to all types of texts. When there are references to specific considerations for specific texts, they are explicitly noted.

Relevancy

"Data is inherently dumb," proclaimed Peter Sondergaard, head of research at Gartner, Inc., a global research and advisory firm. "It doesn't actually do anything unless you know how to use it; how to act with it..." (Oliver, 2015).

Aside from type, your first search should review the sources found for relevance, because breaking down your research question into potential search terms may still not yield the most focused and useful results.

So, what are you looking for?

First, take time to determine which types of multimodal sources might be relevant to your project. For example, if you are researching the hidden voices of young adults in an urban setting, then perhaps spoken word performances may be an excellent multimodal research tool to consider along with expert sources that help you interpret the performances. On the other hand, if your research is about incarceration rates in urban environments, it is highly likely that spoken word performances may not be credible nor reliable.

As another example, you may have interesting conversations with a friend regarding the Korean War; however, these conversations would not be considered reliable research about the war. Conducting an academic interview with a veteran who had first hand experience of the war through service would be much more credible and reliable.

Second, review your potential sources to see whether or not they are useful to your HIA team. That is, what information would the source provide you that you need? By examining titles and abstracts, you can easily determine if the source will provide useful historical or theoretical information regarding your topic. Perhaps the source contains an answer to your research question with a rationale for that answer. Or, perhaps your source surveys a number of potential responses to your question so that you can easily see how scholars have discussed your research question thus far.

Third, to the extent possible, you should try to determine what the author's purpose, overall project, or thesis is so that you do not use the author's work out of context or unfairly.

Lastly, once you have determined that a source is relevant, you should scan the references to see if there are seminal sources (works that are classic or essential to the field) listed and scan the document to see if there are any additional keywords that will support you in revising and focusing your search.

SECOND SEARCH: CURRENCY AND CREDIBILITY/ETHOS

Currency

Your second search should utilize the more focused keywords and authors that you found in your first pass in the databases and/or Google Scholar. However, this time, do not review the list right away. Instead, filter it so that you only search within the last five years, unless you are dealing with seminal works. Occasionally, you will encounter a topic or question that no one has researched in the last five years. Then, of course, you want to find whatever is the most current research available and figure out why no one has worked on this topic in some time.

Credibility/Ethos

Once you have filtered your list for currency, you can start to sort for credibility. The credibility of a source depends on the type of source being used. While the section "Type" in the previous graphic will help your HIA team classify the sources that you are using, also consider the following rules of thumb:

1. Books

Generally speaking, self-published books are not considered as credible as books published by commercial publishers and/or university presses. In terms of credibility, university press published books rank highest, because they tend to receive much more scrutiny from experts in a given field.

2. Periodicals/Journals

We are entering an era where academic knowledge building is being increasingly democratized and digitized, which is great. Nevertheless, greater accessibility of information may belie its credibility. If you decide to use open access resources, you should review them carefully to ensure that the information has been properly vetted by experts in the field. Peer-reviewed research is simply more credible.

3. Internet Domains

Researchers are encouraged to stick closely to the domains of educational institutions (.edu) and the government (.gov) or the military (.mil). This does not mean that the other domains — .net, .com, .org — are useless. They, however, require more scrutiny and review, as discussed in the last section.

Further Review

After two distinct searches, you are now ready to read more deeply the works that are left before you. What you are now looking for are logical, grammatical, and intellectual errors that may reduce a writer's credibility even if the work passed the tests for relevance and currency above. Some areas of review include the following:

1) **Bias** – We are all biased, but when does one's bias override one's credibility? One great example of this is a site about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. that is hosted by NeoNazis. Again, "data is dumb" (Oliver, 2015). While specific facts may be accurate, the overall interpretation may be misleading.

2) **Logical Fallacies** – You can find a number of websites online that discuss common logical fallacies, such as ad hominem (to attack a person rather than the person's argument) or straw man (to distort an argument so as to more easily rebut it). Your English instructor or a librarian or a logician can easily assist you in sorting through articles for logical fallacies.

3) **Grammatical Errors and Typos** – If an author and/or editor has not effectively edited the material, the argument(s) proposed may not be very sound. Researchers are encouraged to pay close attention to such details.

4) **Factual Errors** – If the author's facts are incorrect, this may mean that their overall argument or thesis is also incorrect or ill-informed.

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