Starting Your Research - Selecting a Source

The types of sources that will be necessary for your research assignments will vary from class to class, and often your instructor will provide instructions on the type and number of sources necessary. When selecting resources, think about what types of resources will best answer your question.

You may need any of the following:

- Background sources (reference works such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, some web sites)
- In-depth coverage (books, some scholarly articles)
- Critical analysis (books, scholarly articles)
- Current research (scholarly articles)
- Current events (news sources)
- Other types of resources (maps, video, images, interviews, etc.)

Reference Works

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a reference work is “a source of factual information...intended for research or consultation on individual matters rather than continuous reading.” Reference works, such as encyclopedias, can be a valuable resource at the beginning of the research process.

**Search In:** The library catalog

**Uses:**

- Background research
- Quick, reliable facts and statistics
- Gain greater familiarity with a topic
- Narrow or broaden a research topic
- Discover new terminology to use as keywords in database searches

**Examples:**

- Encyclopedia Britannica
- Encyclopedia of Rhetoric
- Oxford English Dictionary
- The Rand McNally Atlas of the Oceans

Scholarly (Peer-Reviewed) Journals

A scholarly journal (also known as an academic journal or a peer-reviewed journal) is a type of serial publication which publishes articles of a scholarly nature. The content of such journals is subject-specific, geared towards an academic audience, and is written by experts in the field. Prior to publication, all articles published in a peer-reviewed journal undergo a peer-review process in which the editor(s) of the journal will send articles that are being considered for publication to other scholars in the same field (i.e. to the author’s peers). These scholars will then assess the article’s relevance, quality of scholarship, appropriateness for the journal, etc.
**Search In:** Online databases

**Uses:**

- Most recently published research
- Critical analysis by experts
- More in-depth, detailed research on a topic

**Examples:**

- American Literary Scholarship
- Annual Review of Psychology
- African American Review
- Bell Journal of Economics

**Books**

Books can be excellent sources for both broad and in-depth knowledge of a subject. They may provide a general overview or history of a subject, critical analysis from a particular angle, multiple perspectives on an issue, and more. In addition, the bibliography of a book can point researchers to other important works on a subject.

**Search in:** The library catalog (for both physical and electronic books)

**Uses:**

- Background research
- Summarized, more in-depth knowledge of a subject
- Bibliographies and reference lists which point to other significant works on a subject

**Examples:**

- *Alexander Hamilton: Writings*
- *Marijuana and health: report of a study*
- *The Second Amendment on trial: critical essays on District of Columbia v. Heller*