Using Sources

When searching for sources, it’s helpful to think about the different roles each source might play in your research. The following is a list of suggestions to help you get started in your thinking.

Sources that provide background information

Remember that research is like a conversation. Sometimes you go into that conversation already knowing a little about the topic. Other times you might need to learn a bit more about the topic before diving into the discussion. Reference sources are the foundation on which you will start to build your understanding of your topic.

Sources that support what you already know

At some point, whether it’s before you begin your research or after you’ve gathered a little background information, you’re going to start to have some working knowledge about the topic. Citing sources that support what you already know adds credibility to your argument. It’s a way of backing yourself up and providing proof that this way of thinking about the topic does, in fact, exist.

Sources that add new information

You likely don’t know everything about your topic. Or it could just be that there’s an angle you haven’t considered yet. Your knowledge about your topic doesn’t need to be exhaustive, but it should be well-rounded. Seeking out sources that add new information will help you make sure your bases are covered.

Sources that challenge your argument

This is where research can get a little nerve-wracking. Why would you incorporate a source that challenges your point of view? Doesn’t that weaken your argument? In fact, the contrary is true. Remember that research is not about finding the right answer, but instead about negotiating meaning from a variety of perspectives. Acknowledging and addressing other points of view can make your own argument that much richer.

Sources from which you can pull quotes

Pulling a quote from a source can go a long way toward supporting your argument. The trick is to remember not to try to make the quote do the arguing for you. Repeating back what someone else said verbatim without adding anything new would be considered bad conversation etiquette, even if you give proper credit to the person who originally said it. The same holds true in research. To learn more about effective ways to use exact quotes, check out They Say/I Say by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein (University Library REF PE1431 .G73 2014).