

Using Internet Sources for Research Papers

Don't ask too much of your sources

- If *you* aren't saying anything in your research paper, piling a lot of source material into the paper isn't going to matter. Before you start researching, you need to come up with your thesis. Use sources to make *your* point—don't make your point based on the sources you use.
- You need to understand what your sources are providing before you use them in your project. Being too hasty to use a source can backfire if you end up disproving your point or making an irrelevant point.

Think about what you want from your sources

- Do you want numbers? Population figures? Demographics? Think of sources like the US Census Bureau, state web sites, and other government sources.
- Are you looking for scientific findings? Try a search like “geology journals.” If you're looking for terminology, try “sociology dictionary.” Search sites like Google scholar for scholarly documents.
- Would it help to know who the experts are in the field you're studying? Watch for names you see popping up a lot in your search results and search for those people to see if they have authored other pieces that may be useful to you.
- What is it you're trying to do with the paper? Inform? Persuade? Argue? Think about what types of information would be useful for your goal.

Decipher the dot

The endings of URLs can help you determine what sort of site you're viewing. “.com” stands for commercial. These sites are often considered undesirable for research because of their connection to businesses and for-profit groups.

“.net”(network) sites should be treated the same as .com sites. “.edu” is associated with educational institutions. These sites are usually considered reliable, but as a researcher you still need to be sure of the expertise behind the source. If a page is created by an individual or school organization within the university, you still need to weigh the information's usefulness for your project. The “.org” ending indicates a site related to an organization. While these sites can be useful, it's important to be aware that organizations usually have an agenda. Be aware of political or social stands being taken by the organization and how that might affect the credibility of the information on their site. “.gov” indicates a government web site. These sites can be useful, but don't forget that government web sites can also be biased, depending on which government or political group is creating and sponsoring them.

Tips:

- Do a search for search engines. For instance, search for “science search engines” or “psychology search engines,” or “history search engines.”
- Look for the user guide in your search engine. Putting quotation marks around a search term or terms usually narrows the results of your search to that exact word or words. Some searches can include what's called a wild card, which will return results with multiple endings (femin* may give you results like feminism, femininity, feminine, feminist, etc.).
- Don't rely on your search engine to rank the search results for you. Many search engines (including the most popular ones) offer results that are sponsored, meaning someone paid money to have their web site pop up when those terms are entered. Don't just look at the first few results—go deeper, try different search terms, or branch off from the results you get.
- A two-letter code at the end of a URL (“ca” or “uk” or “au”) is often an abbreviation for a country (Canada, United Kingdom, Australia). Make sure that the information you get from a site like this relates to your project.
- For many instructors, *Wikipedia* is *not* an acceptable source. Because its entries can be authored and altered by basically anyone, its contents are not usually seen as academically viable.
- Use the school library! Even if you're not using a library computer, you can usually access the library's resources by entering some login information like a barcode from your student id card or other readily available information.
- Make sure the website you are using is credible. Is the author identified? Are the author's credentials listed? Is the webpage current? Does the website provide balanced information or is it biased? Who sponsors the website?

Sources to Try

- Internet Public Library <<http://www.ipl.org/>>
- American Fact Finder <<http://www.factfinder.census.gov>>
- Federal government statistics <<http://www.fedstats.gov>>