

## USING SOURCES

### 1. What is a source?

A source is any piece of information. It can take the form of an advertisement, information from a book, interviews, websites, pamphlets, and so on. The most important aspect to remember about a source is that it is information obtained from somewhere other than yourself and therefore the source must be acknowledged.

### 2. Why are sources important?

Sources are important because they often support your argument or give weight to an opinion you hold. Without a source of information to support your claim, your argument or opinion may lack credibility. Often students use their own experiences to support a claim. However, unless the assignment requires a self-reflective piece drawing on your own experiences, your own experience is not sufficient to support an argument or opinion. It is important therefore that your source is authoritative.

### 3. What is an authoritative source?

An authoritative source is often a person who is knowledgeable about the area of study and has written extensively about the topic. This is the source of information that you will most often be using. It is therefore important to know who the experts in your field of study are. However, the authoritative nature of your source could vary depending on the assignment that you are doing. If the assignment is a research assignment requiring interviews, the authority of the source will depend on the amount of people being interviewed and their knowledge of the issue under investigation. Furthermore, if you are asked to do an assignment which requires, for example, that you study the effectiveness of posters trying to educate the youth about HIV/AIDS, your source of information would be posters the youth have contact with most frequently.

### 4. Establishing the reliability of a source

The sources of information that you are most likely to use are written sources from books, others are government publications and, in today's computer age, websites. With regard to books, the authoritative nature of the book can be determined by the status of the author or by examining the bibliography of the book and the purpose for which the book has been published. Also, the date of publishing could be important as information and debates may change as more research is done.

The authoritative nature of a website is far more difficult and therefore important to ascertain than that of a book. The Internet is filled with websites seeking to promote their own agenda and often filled with unreliable and incorrect information. It is therefore imperative that the credibility of the website is established. The following questions should be considered before accepting a website as an authoritative source:

**Who?**

Who is the person or institution responsible for publishing this information? Note full details of author (person or institution), and, if necessary, publisher, journal, or web address  
Ask yourself: Why should you believe this person?

**What?**

What are the author's key points? Are they relevant to your task?  
Note full details of title, important points and quotes or other info  
Ask yourself: Why should you accept these ideas? What proof or support is provided for these points? What are the sources of the information? How are visuals used? What is the context of the information?

**When?**

When was the material published?

Note the date of publication. Also, not the date you accessed the web sources, as websites appear and disappear on the Internet, or the information changes. Ask yourself: Is this information still up to date and relevant?

**Why?**

For what purpose has the website been established?

If the website is a dot-com website it is most often to promote certain viewpoints for profit purposes and therefore prone to bias. A website that is education-based, ending in edu., is more authoritative since it performs an educational purpose and is not profit based. Similarly government publications ending in gov., and organisations ending in org, such as Amnesty International, or the World Bank are more reliable.

Ask yourself: Who benefits from the publication of this information? Are there alternative sources that would have different motives?

**To whom?**

Who is the audience the author had in mind when preparing the information?

**5. Why should sources be acknowledged?**

A source should be acknowledged because it contains information that has been formulated by someone other than yourself. It is simply courtesy to illustrate that someone else has provided the information. More importantly, by acknowledging your source you are able to display to your reader that you have researched the area you are writing about. Also, if the reader's interest is heightened by one particular aspect of your writing, they will be able to track down further information through your references.

Plagiarism is the unauthorised and / or unacknowledged use of another's words or thoughts. It can occur deliberately or inadvertently. Copying work (for example, another student's essay, or extracts from books and articles) and presenting it as your own is a deliberate act of theft. Using sentences from someone else's writing in your own without acknowledgement is also regarded as plagiarism.

**6. Referencing**

As mentioned at the start, a source is information obtained from someone or something else and therefore must be acknowledged. By referencing you acknowledge your source. Therefore whether you use a direct quote or whether you paraphrase you must reference.

There are various referencing methods, it is therefore important that you consult your faculty handbook and find out which method you are required to use. The U.C.T website provides information on the most important referencing methods. The website is <http://www.lib.uct.ac.za/infolit/bibl>.

**Referencing Websites:**

The basic form of citations from the web follow the same principles as for print sources:

- Author
- Title of article  
Title of medium (e.g. Name of electronic journal - BMJ) [type of medium e.g. Online]
- Publication Year [cited date – Year Month (abbreviated) Day]. The cited date is the date you accessed the Web page.
- Volume number if applicable:
- Pages or [number of screens].
- Available from: URL: address

**Examples of how to reference websites:**

ASTEC The networked nation [Online]. 1995 Oct 10 [cited 1995 Dec 5]; Available from: [http://astec.gov.au/astec/net\\_nation/contents.html](http://astec.gov.au/astec/net_nation/contents.html).

Hoffman DL. St John's Wort. [Online]. 1995 [cited 1998 Aug 22]; [4 screens]. Available from: [URL:http://www.healthy.net/library/books/hoffman/materiamedica/st\\_johns.htm](http://www.healthy.net/library/books/hoffman/materiamedica/st_johns.htm)

## **7. How to integrate a source**

Sources serve no purpose unless they are properly integrated into your work. Merely quoting an authoritative author, without contextualizing the quote does not add value to your writing. A quote should be preceded or succeeded by a reference to the quote. The following illustrates this point,

“Research undertaken in a rural village in the southern part of Bangladesh showed that the cases of virus transfer was less in areas where clean water was available and therefore basic hygiene procedures could be followed.” (Ramsay 1997:4)

From the above it is evident that proper hygiene can effectively lessen the risk of transfer of the virus.

Quotes should be used sparingly and effectively. Too many quotes ruin the flow of your work and often indicate an inability to express the writer's ideas in your own words. When you do express the writer's idea in your own words, this is known as paraphrasing.

## **8. Paraphrasing**

Paraphrasing is a very important skill to learn at university. It involves practice and more importantly understanding. When you understand the writer's idea it is far easier to express his/her ideas in your own words. As with any source of information, paraphrasing should be integrated into your work. The following illustrates,

Similarly, Ramsay believes that proper hygiene effectively lessens the transfer of the virus and therefore she maintains that hygiene education is imperative for rural communities (1997:8).