

Sources in Your Paper

Chapter 7 from the book:
Lotte Rienecker and Peter Stray Jørgensen
with contributions by Signe Skov

The Good Paper - A Handbook for Writing Papers in Higher Education

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7. Sources in Your Paper

Sources are the part of the literature you choose to use in your paper – for example, data, theories, and methods. A field stores its knowledge, history, general understandings (theories) and tools (methods) in the literature. One way of demonstrating your disciplinary skills is through your use of sources.

What is a source?

“A source is not a source, before it is a source “for” something, and it is not a source for something until it is related to a question, no matter how vague this question may be”.

(Olden-Jørgensen, 2001, p. 49)

You can demonstrate independence – a central theme in this book – in your treatment of sources through your ability to:

- search, find and summarise relevant material
- organise the material according to a theme
- relate your literature review to your own research question
- place your own work in relation to tradition and innovation, others' work, existing understandings and theories.

(Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 1997, p. 59)

Sources' functions in and for the paper

Texts of the field can have different functions in your paper. Becoming aware of and showing in your paper why each bit of text is included is therefore a definite advantage.

Sources for your paper can be used as:

- tools for information searches
- sources of inspiration (e.g. to find problems, answers, perspectives)
- a basis for general insight into and overview of the topic
- models for your own work.

Sources in your paper can be used as:

- the object – as primary sources to analyse, criticise, evaluate
- state of the art – as a starting point and to preface your own work
- support, evidence and documentation for the paper's claim
- a methodological and theoretical foundation
- a means for discussion.

Usually a distinction is made between three types of sources:

Source types

- Primary sources are the “raw” material which acts as data in papers, e.g. historical documents, cases, novels, letters, etc. (“what you write about”).
- Secondary sources interpret the raw material and are the “governing” theories: The concept and theory generators of any field that constitute the field's tools for analysis (“what you use to process (analyse, understand) your material and support your argumentation”).
- Tertiary sources summarise secondary sources and provide an overview of the disciplinary field, e.g. comprehensive textbooks, encyclopedic articles, wikis.

(e.g. Booth et. al., 2008)

Applied sources

A fourth type of text can be used when writing a paper. For want of a better name, we call these “applied sources”. Applied sources are the professional texts that apply, comment, interpret, expand, criticise and evaluate the field's theories and concepts on the basis of practice. For example, reports on practical experiments conducted on the basis of the field's perspectives, serious reviews, and discussions in the press.

These texts are often written by the field's teachers and researchers and other academic writers, yet, these texts often have no scientific status. These practice-related, professional texts will often put primary and secondary sources into perspective and contribute to evaluating and nuancing these. However, applied sources cannot stand alone: They can serve as a possible supplement or source of inspiration.

The professionalism and scholarliness of sources

The professional and scholarly quality of the sources used in your paper can vary widely.

Sources listed according to scholarliness

- Peer reviewed books and articles
- Other academic texts, e.g. textbooks, surveys, monographs
- General disciplinary works, e.g. debate books, disciplinary articles written by the practitioners of the field
- Popular articles
- Other "everyday texts", e.g. newspapers, magazines, brochures.

If an article is peer reviewed, it means that a professional in the field has carefully read and approved the article's research quality. Articles published in respected journals are usually peer reviewed. Naturally, papers can include sources that are not scientific. However, the point is that these must be used and evaluated on the basis of their professional and scientific status. Popular articles, in e.g. *Cosmopolitan* may make a good primary source, but not a good secondary source. Interviews quoting researchers and authors can be an exception.

Why use secondary sources?

While some students use secondary sources too much and in too summarising a manner, other students are not willing enough to use their field's secondary sources, as they believe this hinders independence. Thus they are disinclined to include others' texts and would rather present their own views. In connection with a course on the use of primary and secondary sources, we asked the 100 participating students to note down what they knew and were unsure of in regards to using sources in a paper.

Many mentioned that they disliked using secondary sources.

We recognise this (seductive) view from many talks with students. However, using others' text is the prerequisite for writing independently; not the alternative. Although some secondary sources can perhaps be reduced to "thoughts people have had", you cannot possibly replace the secondary sources of the field with your own thoughts or act as a secondary source in their place. Any thinker who is read and resonates within a field, thinks on the basis of the field's tradition and history, and these thinkers inscribe themselves in the field's long-existing dialogue, even though they may be in opposition to established thought. This is the ideal way of using the field's sources: Students must write on the basis of the field's immediate level of knowledge and discourse, and this must be reflected in their text. You should demonstrate independence in the way in which you analyse, interpret, discuss and evaluate sources (which you must naturally do on the basis of well-defined criteria, not simply subjective judgment). You do not demonstrate independence by refraining from using the field's existing sources. This is precisely what you must learn. You can overcome the dislike of "referring to what others have said", "repeating again" by using secondary sources in a way and context that clearly presents your own agenda. Secondary sources must form a coherent part of the structure of the paper's argumentation (see chapter 11).

Using secondary sources in papers – which and how

You must use secondary sources in most papers in most educations. The exception is small assignments, such as translation assignments or assignments where you must demonstrate your observation skills. Tertiary sources are good for providing an overview of the process. But you must always consider whether a tertiary source can be used as an actual source.

You must have a clear reason for including secondary sources – they must be relevant for the paper at hand. For assessing whether a source is relevant, you can ask the following questions: