APA Style – BEFORE You Write Your Paper: Research and Credibility

APA Style is one set of standards and rules for written communication. This includes:

- the organization of paper
- your writing style
- giving credit to the outside sources you used to write your paper

10% of APA style happens BEFORE you write your paper, specifically, which outside sources are “better” than others. APA style is very clear on this hierarchy, and by surrounding yourself with the reliable, primary, and scholarly sources, you are showing the reader your writing deserves to stand alongside them.

The Best Sources Are:

Reliable: Use the Writing Center Handout “Locating and Evaluating Sources” to help you determine whether the source you found is reliable, verifiable, and of high quality.

Primary: When the people who wrote about the findings are also the people that discovered the finding or conducted the research on the findings, it is considered a primary source.

Scholarly: The rules of thumb for scholarly sources are

1. it is written by scholars, academics, or experts for the express purpose of advancing knowledge in their respective field;
2. they use a known formatting styles (like APA), including citing their sources;
3. the more eyes that see the source before it is published, the better, i.e., it has undergone a peer-review or editorial process.

Some common reliable, primary, and scholarly sources are academic journal articles; books and book chapters; reports, such as from government agencies or institutions; or dissertations and theses.

Other Suitable Sources Are:

Secondary: When the people who wrote the source did not discover the finding, did not conduct the research, or are reporting what someone else found, it is considered a secondary source. Use secondary sources to find links to the original, primary source!

Non-scholarly: These are often called “popular” or “professional/trade” sources. The major differences are: (1) they are often written to convince you of something – for example, to buy something or to think a certain way; (2) there are limited or no references to other sources; or (3) they do not need to be vetted by other experts before publication. These sources can be helpful to point you to a scholarly source, or if your paper calls for analysis of public opinions.

What Sources Are Off Limits?

Nothing! Technically everything that you have found (and can physically show to another person) can be a source. Anything that no longer available or you cannot physically show to another person (like a conversation or personal email) can still be cited as a personal communication.

1 Check with your professor. They may have strict guidelines about what they deem is acceptable!

This resource was created using information from the APA Style blog and from the Campus Library of the University of Washington Bothell and Cascadia College.