

Key to CAPITALIZED WORDS in the Research Flow Chart

QUESTION and NARROW: First, always base your research on a QUESTION that you come up with. By doing that rather than just entering a topic into a search engine, you'll do actual research rather than simply report on the research *other people* have done. Second, make sure your research question is NARROW enough. If it's too broad, you will only scratch at the surface of all available information on your topic, and your paper will be overly basic. The idea is to "go deep rather than broad." So instead of just having a topic like "the Industrial Revolution," you should ask a specific, narrow question you're curious about - for example, "How did the Industrial Revolution affect poverty in urban England?" The elements of "poverty," "urban," and "England" narrow down the topic; "How" gives a valid *question* to answer.

CURRENCY: This means *when a text was written*, which is often important because information can quickly become obsolete. Supporting your thesis statement with facts that are no longer relevant because of new research or recent events weakens your argument. Of course, not all assignments require the most current information; older materials can provide an historical or comprehensive understanding of your topic.

To check the currency of a source, ask yourself:

- ▶ When was the information published or last updated?
- ▶ Have newer articles been published on your topic? (If so, do those offer new insights?)
- ▶ Are links or references to other sources up to date? (Check things like this carefully.)
- ▶ Is your topic in an area that changes rapidly, like technology or health care? (If so, then your source should be more current than a source on, for example, a biological process scientists still understand in the same way today.)

RELEVANCE: This means importance – is the source you've obtained actually *important to your research question*? Not everything that pertains to your topic necessarily belongs in your paper. As an obvious example, a source detailing Einstein's marriage and family life would not be relevant to his theories in physics.

How do you know if your source is relevant?

- ▶ Does the information help directly answer your research question?
- ▶ Does the information meet the stated requirements of the assignment?
- ▶ Is the information too technical or too simplified for you to use?
- ▶ Does the source add something new to your knowledge of your topic? (Regarding this final question, it is important to verify a source's information by checking other credible sources. However, only one source should be included in your paper for each new idea you cover.)

AUTHORITY: This pertains to whether or not the author of the source you found is *enough of an expert on the topic*. Judging the credibility of the author's assertions (i.e., statements, claims, or ideas) is obviously important. In a trial regarding DNA evidence, for example, a jury gives far more authority to what a genetics specialist has to say compared to someone off the street. Make sure the author of a text you're considering to use in a research project is sufficiently authoritative.

How do you know if an author is an authority on your topic?

- ▶ What are the author's credentials? (GOOD = PhD in the field you're researching, writer for an authoritative & objective publication/organization such as the American Medical Association, etc. BAD = university student, private blogger, marketer for a business, etc.)
- ▶ Is the author affiliated with an educational institution or prominent organization?
- ▶ Can you find information (good info of course) about the author from reference books or the Internet? Do other books or articles cite the author?
- ▶ If you can't find the author's name, does the article/source clearly reflect the official position of a credible, established, impartial organization?

ACCURACY: ACCURACY is important because if you use inaccurate information, you weaken your argument and undermine your own credibility.

How do you know if your source is accurate?

- ▶ Are there statements you know to be false?
- ▶ Are there errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar? (Poor editing means poor quality....)
- ▶ Was the information reviewed by editors or subject experts before it was published? (i.e., was it peer reviewed?)
- ▶ What citations or references support the author's claims? (Are there any such citations or references?)
- ▶ What do other people have to say about the topic? (And is there any evidence of bias in any people who support the author's claims?)

PURPOSE: This refers to the author's/organization's purpose - why was the information published? Purpose is important because books, articles, and Web pages exist to educate, entertain, or sell a product or point of view. Some sources may be frivolous or commercial in nature, providing inadequate, false, or biased information. Other sources are more ambiguous concerning their purpose. Varied points of view can be valid, as long as they are based upon good reasoning and solid evidence.

How do you determine the purpose of your source?

- ▶ Why did the author or publisher make this information available? (Often GOOD: public service & educational purposes. Often NOT SO GOOD: personal & commercial purposes)
- ▶ Is there a conflict of interest? (Ex: Was an article about the effects of smoking published by a tobacco manufacturer or someone employed by one?)
- ▶ Is there a bias or prejudice? (Does the source exaggerate, overstate, or favor an idea?)
- ▶ Are alternative points of view presented?
- ▶ Does the author omit important facts or data that might disprove a claim?
- ▶ Does the author use strong or emotional language? (In other words, is the rhetorical appeal of pathos used to convey or "sell" the author's ideas?)

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