

Selecting Assignment Sources

Start by asking yourself the following questions so you can determine how to best use your time and energy in the research process.

1. What length of paper is required?

Normally the longer the paper the more in depth the treatment of the topic will be. Depth and thoroughness typically require more resources; and the more resources you require, the more time you will need to devote to finding them. While the number of resources suitable for research papers varies among disciplines, a common guideline is to have 5-8 resources for a shorter paper and 8-10 resources for a longer paper. Consult your assignment or your instructor for clarification.

2. What types of sources are required for my assignment?

If your essay requires the most recent research, consult more recently published resources, such as the latest journal articles. When earlier research is also appropriate, consider a variety of resources, including books and journal articles published in past years. If your assignment requires scholarly resources, include academic books and journal articles written by experts or scholars in a specific field. These employ rigorous and critical methods appropriate for particular disciplines. Popular sources, such as magazines and newspapers, are sometimes appropriate and are very useful for current commentary on a topic or issue. When uncertain about the appropriateness of using a resource for your research, consult your instructor or librarian.

3. Does the disciplinary perspective matter?

Topics can be examined from different perspectives. For example, AIDS can be discussed from a health, economic, or psychological point of view. If your assignment requires resources from a particular disciplinary perspective, consult the disciplinary Research Guide on the library home page.

4. Do you need primary or secondary resources? Do you understand the difference?

What constitutes a primary or secondary source depends on the topic and/or disciplinary perspective. Primary sources include first-hand accounts of historical events or of a person's life. In some cases, they also include original research. Secondary sources are works written later about a subject, are usually written by people who were not participants in or eye-witnesses to an historical event and contain information that interprets, analyzes, or debates the topic. Some general guidelines for various subject areas:

- **History** (e.g., sinking of the Titanic): newspaper accounts from the time, diaries, photographs or other first-person accounts of an event are usually primary sources. Secondary sources include later accounts and analyses of the event from non-participants.
- **Literary research** (e.g., gender in Shakespeare's plays): original works of fiction are primary sources. Interviews with, or biographies of, authors are generally regarded as primary sources as well. Secondary sources include commentaries and criticism of particular primary works or authors.
- **Health or social sciences**: original research articles that test a hypothesis or explore an idea or theoretical construct are primary sources. For research on Freud, for example, his original writings would be considered primary sources. Secondary sources include later commentaries on Freud and his ideas.

If you are unsure of what constitutes a primary source for your topic, consult your instructor.