



Types of sources

Different sources for different purposes

You may encounter many different types of sources as you begin to research your assignment. Each kind of source has its place in expanding your knowledge and understanding of a topic.

Not all sources are equal, though. You'll need to look carefully at each one and critically evaluate it so you can work out where it fits within the range of 'voices' on your topic. For more information about how to critically evaluate sources, see [Critical Thinking](#) (PDF, 145 kB). You should also watch the Library video [Evaluating sources using APPEAL](#) (video, 6:26).

The sections below describe different kinds of sources and what you could use them for.

Scholarly sources and non-scholarly sources

You may read in your Learning Guide or hear your tutor tell you that you should only use scholarly sources as evidence in your assignments.

Scholarly sources are sources that have been produced as a result of a rigorous research process and then reviewed by other scholars before they are published. Generally, they are written by qualified people in the academic community for other people in the academic community (like students, researchers, lecturers, etc.).

Non-scholarly sources are sources written or produced for an audience outside the academic community, i.e. the general public.

Source type	What it's useful for	Examples
Scholarly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ University assignments→ Academic research→ Other kinds of research (government reports, etc)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Peer-reviewed journal articles→ Scholarly books (written by academics for academics or for students)→ Academic conference papers→ Published research data sets→ Academic book reviews
Non-scholarly	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ General knowledge→ Everyday purposes, e.g. news, entertainment, social media sharing, topics of conversation→ As data to analyse	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ News→ General websites (including Wikipedia)→ Blogs (including those written by academics)→ Social media posts→ Fiction books→ Popular non-fiction books (including those written by academics for a general audience)→ Government documents and publications

General sources and specific sources

It's important to recognise that some types of sources rely on more general knowledge, and some rely on more specific, specialised knowledge. You'll probably start your research with general sources, but make sure you move on to specific sources. Your marker will be looking to see that you have read and understood the more specialised information that specific sources give.

Source type	What it's useful for	Examples
General source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Getting started in your understanding of a topic→ Understanding the key terms used→ Getting familiar with the important concepts and researchers in the field who are interested in that topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Encyclopedias→ Dictionaries→ Introductory textbooks→ Wikipedia
Specific source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Deepening your understanding of a topic and the specific issues associated with it	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Journal articles→ Scholarly monograph books (by one author)→ Edited books and book chapters (by multiple authors)→ PhD theses and dissertations

Primary sources and secondary sources

A **primary** source is one where the author witnessed firsthand the events or phenomena they are writing about. A **secondary** source is one where the author is reporting on something that someone else saw and has written about.

Source type	What it's useful for	Examples
Primary source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Analysing as data for scientific, historical or social research→ Getting as close as possible to the event or phenomenon you are interested in	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Research reports (esp. in natural sciences)→ Personal journals, memoirs, letters, etc→ Public speeches→ Newspaper or magazine articles (current news)→ Audio or video recordings→ Photographs or artworks→ Literary works (poetry, novels, plays)→ Artefacts→ Records (statistical, etc)
Secondary source	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Understanding how other people have interpreted the event→ Understanding the different issues that are relevant in the study of the event or phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Journal articles→ Academic books (including history books, textbooks, etc)→ Encyclopaedias

Quantitative sources and qualitative sources

This distinction mainly applies to data that you might have to collect and/or analyse in a research project. **Quantitative** data is information about things that can be measured and expressed in numbers. **Qualitative** data is information about the qualities of things, which can't be measured and are usually expressed in words.

Source type	What it's useful for	Examples
Quantitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Statistical analysis→ Describing tendencies in terms of probabilities→ Disciplines such as science, economics, accounting, engineering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Statistics from the ABS→ Results from a science experiment
Qualitative	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Content analysis→ Understanding behaviour (human or animal)→ Describing specific cases (e.g. case studies)→ Describing general characteristics→ Disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, literary studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">→ Texts (literature, stories, poetry, articles, etc)→ Artefacts (objects)→ Descriptions of behaviour or characteristics

More information

Once you've found your sources, you will want to use them effectively. Visit our [Researching and reading](#) section to explore strategies for reading effectively and organising your reading.



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Kim Heckenberg (Manager)	Katrina Trewin
Linda Parker (Manager)	Claire Urbach
Tahlia Birnbaum	Anna Wallace
Tae McKnight	Fiona Webber
Beverley Miles	Lisa Worthington
Sara Perley	



Activity

Using the following table, consider each type of source in terms of the four ways of classifying sources. Some have been done for you. Which ones are hard to decide? Why?

	Scholarly	Non-scholarly	Generic	Specific	Primary	Secondary	Quantitative	Qualitative
Journal articles (peer-reviewed)	X			X		X	X	
Academic conference papers								
News (online, print or AV)		X	X		X			
Blogs								
Fiction books and literary texts								
Popular non-fiction books								
Government documents and publications								
Wikipedia								
Encyclopaedias								
Introductory textbooks								
Theses/dissertations								
Historical accounts								
Personal journals, memoirs, letters								
ABS statistics								
Photographs/artworks								