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RW301 | Lesson 02

Guide to Research Writing

Research Writing

Drafting

From the previous lesson, you'll remember that the second step in writing is to draft your work. Before you begin to write, however, you need sufficient information to write a credible paper. So in this lesson you'll hear about sources and research before you receive information about the draft itself.

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Drafting

Drafting, Research, and Sources

By the end of this session, you should:

- be able to list sources that may be used in writing a research paper.
- understand what is a reputable source.
- be able to conduct an online search of a database.
- identify an instructor's expectations for an assignment.
- know some ways of organizing your research.

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Sources

- Traditional
- Other
- Cautions

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Introduction

From the previous lesson, you'll remember that the second step in writing is to draft your work. Before you begin to write, however, you need sufficient information to write a credible paper. So in this lesson you'll hear about sources and research before you receive information about the draft itself.

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to do the following:

- List sources that may be used in writing a research paper.
- Understand what is a reputable source.
- Conduct an online search of a database.
- Identify an instructor's expectations for an assignment.
- Know some ways of organizing your research.

Although writing begins with an idea, a writer needs more than an idea and opinions. As a writer, you will need to find other sources that speak about your topic. Among those sources are traditional ones that quickly come to mind: books, chapters in books, journal articles, or articles in reference works. Many of those sources are available online.

Beyond these usual sources, however, are sources less frequently consulted. If you decide to write an essay about the benefit of connecting with friends, you might search online to see if the Barna Group has conducted surveys on that topic. Although survey results would be a small part of your essay, they can frame your argument. In addition, the authors of the survey may reference other sources that prove useful.

So far, you've heard about traditional sources—books, reference works, journal articles—and a less traditional source, surveys. Other sources are newspaper articles, Internet sites, television programs or interviews, radio programs or interviews, documentaries, and interviews that you conduct.

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Determining a Reputable Source

Some cautions apply here. An example is a newspaper article about a local superintendent of schools who posted plagiarized material in his blog. This article will provide one piece of a mosaic. A series of articles about authors who have been accused of plagiarism allows you, as a writer, to fill in other pieces of the mosaic. In a similar way, an in-depth radio or television program, an extended interview in either medium (or in person), or a documentary can add facts or a range of perspectives to enrich your writing.

Another caution is to use only reputable sources. In the example just mentioned, the local newspaper is a reputable source. The reporter spoke to the embarrassed superintendent and to a representative from the state Association of School Administrators. Links are given for the superintendent's blog and the blog from which the material was plagiarized. In other words, someone has done original research, backed by facts, which you or any other reader can check, if you are so inclined.

In a similar way, an investigative series published in a major newspaper, such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, or the Christian Science Monitor, is considered a reputable source. Keep in mind that this assessment is distinct from real or perceived bias. The Times is popularly described as a liberal-leaning publication; the Journal as conservative. It is useful to be aware of possible bias, but an investigative piece about the amount of taxes that major corporations do not pay is fact-based. The interpretation or analysis of those facts—which in best journalistic practice belongs on the op-ed pages—is where point of view comes into play. Remember, also, that all people have a point of view. It is possible to disagree with a point of view but still learn from it. The word bias, however, often has a pejorative connotation, hinting that someone deliberately distorts information. It is prudent to read critically, but it is possible to learn from people whose views differ from your own.

So how do you as a writer determine what is a reputable source? Let's use an example from the resources for lesson 1: a chapter in a book.

Because Bloom's taxonomy was referenced indirectly in lesson 1, I as a writer wanted a source that would give interested readers an overview of the taxonomy and its significance. Typing "Bloom's taxonomy" into a search engine yielded "about 266,000 results (0.15 seconds)." The second result listed is a link to Wikipedia—more about that in a few moments. The seventh

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Reputable Sources

- Chapter in a book
- Research or scholarly societies
- Print media
- Broadcast media
- Research organizations

result is <http://projects.coe.uga.edu/epltt/>, which is a link to an article by Mary Forehand at the University of Georgia. How did I know that? A hint is in the URL: uga.edu. This tells a researcher that the site is affiliated with a university. Clicking on the link brings the researcher to “Bloom’s Taxonomy,” a contribution to Emerging Perspectives on Learning, Teaching, and Technology. This is an online version of a book edited by Michael Orey and published by the Association for Educational Communications and Technology.

Reputable sources include information from

- Universities
- Research or scholarly societies, such as the National Geographic Society or the Society for Biblical Literature, to cite disparate disciplines
- Print media such as evangelical publishers or university presses
- Broadcast media, such as Bill Moyers’ PBS series about Joseph Campbell (one need not agree with the views expressed)
- Research organizations such as the Barna Group or The Pew Charitable Trusts—both of which study a range of topics having to do with religion

By contrast, imagine that you find posts by an anonymous blogger. The blogger propounds a novel interpretation of the book of Revelation. But this view is not even mentioned by respected commentators who have differing interpretations of Revelation. This blog may provoke outrage or amusement. It may give you a starting point for research: What do commentators say? In what ways is Revelation interpreted? But you wouldn’t use the blog to support your argument.

In a somewhat similar way, an opinion piece may provide ideas or valuable insights, but it may not be a significant source in your final writing.

And the word about Wikipedia: It isn’t considered a reputable source. Why? If you’re familiar with Wikipedia, you know that any reader can edit entries. Although it’s possible that a reader-editor might have exclusive, accurate information about a topic, it is equally possible that someone contributes inaccurate information. You may take a swift glance at Wikipedia if, say, you don’t recognize a writer who is mentioned in an online article. But you would go to other sources to learn about that writer. One final caution about Wikipedia is that if you cite it, some

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Non-Reputable Sources

- Some Blogs
- Opinion Pieces
- Wikipedia

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Exercise 1

1. Go to <http://library.calvin.edu>
2. Click on Quick Links, then Library Catalog
3. Follow instructor's steps

instructors will return your work unread. Other instructors will remind you not to use it as a source.

Reputable sources, however, are readily available. For the purposes of this course, we'll concentrate on sources that can be found online. A good way to learn about online research is to be hands-on, as the saying goes. So take a moment to boot up your computer, if you need to do that. When you're ready:

- Go to <http://library.calvin.edu>
- Click on Quick Links, then Library Catalog

On this website, it is possible to search by keyword, author, title, subject, or series. It is also possible to search by format: all formats, books, large-print books, e-books, audiobooks, video recordings, music, or electronic resources. You can choose a language in which to search: English (US), English (Canada), French (Canada), or Armenian. You can do an advanced search, or choose a collection to search.

To become familiar with the search process, let's begin with a straightforward search of the catalog, using the keywords "commentary on Acts." The search yields 132 results. Among them are the following:

- C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*
- Raghbirlal Sethi, *The Police Acts, Being an Exhaustive Commentary on Act V of 1861* [published in India]
- F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*
- C. H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts*

Bruce J. Malina, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts*

Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*

Lee Martin McDonald, *From Biblical Criticism to Biblical Faith: Essays in Honor of Lee Martin McDonald*, edited by William H. Brackney and Craig A. Evans [the editors and contributors would be colleagues or former students of the person being honored]

The second entry, *The Police Acts*, is one you'd skim past, though you understand why it appears as a search result. The other resources pertain to the search. The dates of publication range from the late 19th century to the present. (If you want to read the Latin text of John Calvin's commentary on Acts, it is available in a special collection at the library.)

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Exercise 2

1. Go to <http://www.cugn.org>
2. Click on Academics, and then Academic Resources
3. Follow instructor's steps

These commentaries also show a range of perspectives: social science, literary and theological, critical and exegetical. Your purpose for research and writing governs your selection of sources. For example, the content notes for Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts mention Jesus' first command to the disciples, and their activities. You might think, "This commentary would focus on how Jesus' commands to the disciples influenced the way they preached about or responded to the society of their day." If you want a sociological perspective on the book of Acts, this might be a helpful source.

By contrast, Bock's commentary follows a more traditional approach. He discusses sections of the text, explaining it and giving background as necessary. If you want to write about the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 1:12–6:7), this and similar commentaries will provide information and insight.

How did I know this, without going to the library? To find out more about a source, click on the title. The screen that appears will give you a brief description of the book's contents, the number of pages, and the details of publication.

- Now go to <http://www.cugn.org>
- Click on Academics, and then Academic Resources

You will find a list of online resources with a description of each.

Let's click on the link for Northwestern Seminary Library (<http://ntslibrary.com/>), and then click on Article Directory. As you skim the list, you'll see entries for a biographical sketch of John Calvin and an article titled "Jonathan Edwards's Place in the History of Christian Thought." If your assignment is to write about an influential theologian, these articles would be good starting points.

Or perhaps you have some knowledge about John Chrysostom, one of the church fathers. You may have read or heard that he preached about the evils of the circus and the theater. You also know that this website, <http://www.ccel.org/>, has extensive resources about the church fathers. Let's go to that website now.

Click on Browse, then Author, then C, then Chrysostom, John, St. Of the works listed, Select Homilies and Letters seems promising—you know that he spoke frankly in his sermons. So you click on that link and scroll down the page to the search box. In it, you type "circus" and press Enter.

Drafting

Availability of Resources

- Excessive Research
- Paralysis

Drafting

First Draft

- Review the assignment
- Identify tone of writing
- Organize thoughts
 - Outlines
 - Files (electronic/paper)
 - Notecards

The first link is to an article, “Chrysostom as Deacon, Priest and Preacher . . .” by Philip Schaff. Clicking on this link allows you to read a literate short essay about Antioch and the background for Chrysostom’s homilies. Click on “Second Instruction,” and you can read Chrysostom’s tart sermon to his congregation.

This search requires some prior knowledge of a person or a piece of writing. But it is possible to browse using other criteria, such as topic or subject tags.

The best way to familiarize yourself with these sources and other online sources is to use them! Explore the sites. See what categories they use, and what links each has to other sources. Be forewarned, though: The availability of resources may cause giddiness.

The availability of resources may also cause two opposite but equally troublesome responses. The first is the desire always to be researching, never to be writing. It’s easy to be caught up in the delight of tracking sources, reading new authors, and learning new things. But the practical consequences of this are self-evident: The person who never writes will miss the dates when papers are due.

The second response is paralysis, and the consequences of that also are self-evident. The Chinese say that a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step, and unless one takes that first step, one won’t make the journey to completion of projects or other goals. Paralysis sometimes is the result of fear, and the antidote to fear in this context is to become familiar with the resources. Again, use them!

As you prepare to draft any piece of writing, be sure that you understand the assignment. What has your instructor asked you to do? Perhaps you are to read an article about Sabbath keeping and reflect on it. You might be asked to write as few as five pages, and the tone will likely be informal. (In lesson 5, you’ll learn more about tone.) If you are told to write a biographical sketch of an influential theologian, you would be expected to research facts about and analyses of the theologian’s significance. Your instructor might specify a short paper, about 10 pages, or a longer work. The expectations—length of pages, perhaps a specific topic—will be set out. In elementary school, your teacher probably said, “Read the directions.” Understanding the requirements for a research paper is a sophisticated version of reading the directions.

Before you begin your research and writing, it is worthwhile to think about how you'll organize your thoughts, your notes, and, ultimately, your drafts. To gather their thoughts, some people like to make a traditional outline. Other people would rather undergo a root canal. For them, a graphic organizer might work better.

In a similar way, some writers like to keep paper files of their note taking and research; others prefer to have all their files on the computer. Still others may like to use note cards, which can be an effective way to deal with information.

For those of you who did not travel through the halls of your high school with stacks of note cards in your hands . . . using note cards is an effective way to track sources. This method works best for short papers and is less than environmentally friendly. But the principles of it can be adapted to other ways of recording information.

In the note card system, the publishing information about each source—book, article, so on—is recorded on a 3-by-5-inch note card. Each source is assigned a number, which is written at the top right-hand corner of the card, and circled.

Then, as a writer begins to read and research, she makes notes on 4-by-6-inch note cards. She begins by putting the number of the source in the upper right-hand corner of each card. Then, beginning with page 1, she reads and summarizes any salient information on that page. A direct quote is transcribed exactly as it appears in the source. This process is repeated with each new page and for each source.

If a writer were to adapt this method by using either paper and files or computer documents and files, he would transcribe the information about each source and assign a number to it. (It is permissible to photocopy the copyright page of a book or journal and then assign a number to that source.) Notes could then be taken on the pages of a legal tablet, if he finds the physical act of writing helps him to retain knowledge. Or notes could be keyed into an electronic document. In either case, the source number is indicated on the notes. The notes are then stored in a folder.

You have a sense of what works best for you, so choose a system that feels comfortable. Whatever system you choose, follow it consistently—and back up any work you do on your computer.

As you research, you'll begin to draft parts of your paper. For

short papers, you may gather those drafts according to the main headings in an outline or the main categories shown in a graphic organizer. For a longer paper, you may be required to write chapters. If that is the case, keeping a folder for each chapter makes sense. Always back up the electronic version of your work.

In this lesson, you've learned about sources and how to identify reputable ones. You've also been introduced to searching online for sources, and you've had some guided examples of how to do that. Finally, you've heard about ways to record information as you research.

The next lesson about how to cite sources is a logical continuation of this lesson. You'll want to master the skills from this lesson and the next, because knowing how to research and how to use sources simplifies the process of writing. It also contributes to completing a polished piece of writing.

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Putting it into Practice

Review the goals for this session. Have you met them? If you are unclear about any material, review the audio.

For a topic that interests you or for an already assigned paper, brainstorm possible sources. Go online to find books or journal articles.

Go to cugn.org. Choose an online source, and become familiar with it. Practice doing searches. Make notes of the steps you followed, if that helps you to remember what you've learned.

Decide on the method you want to use when you read and research. Set up your files.

Find a source. Practice taking accurate notes.

Begin to outline and draft a piece of writing.

Assignments

- Review the goals for this lesson. Have you met them? If you are unclear about any material, review the audio.
- Read Turabian: Part 1, "Research and Writing: From Planning to Production" (Booth, Colomb, and Williams).
- For a topic that interests you or for an already assigned paper, brainstorm possible sources. Go online to find books or journal articles.
- Go to the Christian University GlobalNet website (cugn.org). Choose an online source, and become familiar with it. Practice doing searches. Make notes of the steps you followed if that helps you to remember what you've learned.
- Decide on the method you want to use when you read and research. Set up your files.
- Find a source. Practice taking accurate notes.
- Begin to outline and draft a piece of writing.