Researching Skills

Using a Variety of Sources

You must use primary AND secondary sources – Why? Primary sources give firsthand information, but they often don’t tell you a lot and are only from one point of view. You need to find secondary sources, which are usually syntheses of primary sources, giving multiple view points, to back up your primary sources – to fill in details and give you more info.

Examples of primary sources you could use: newspapers from historical times, interviews with an expert in your research area (you can conduct these yourself), a table/tally compiling number evidence you have collected in a survey or other way, letters from the time period, emails from an expert in your research area, video diaries of experts in your research area.

Examples of secondary sources you could use: newspapers, internet sites, books, videos discussing different views on the topic, magazine articles.

Finding Valid Information

Valid information is ***relevant*** information NOT reliable information

1. Look at your topic and find the key words.
2. Look up the key words in a search engine (like Google)
3. Look up the key words in indexes and contents tables of books

* Information that mentions your key words only once or twice in a large slab of text is not likely to be very useful.
* Whole books on your topic (or books with a whole chapter on your topic) are going to be useful.
* In whole books about your topic, introductions are a useful (and short) summary of everything covered in the book.
* If information is too simple – it won’t help you much as there won’t be anything new to add to what you already know.
* If information is too complex – it is too hard for you to understand and you are likely to misunderstand what it’s talking about.
* If you are looking at one side of an argument for your topic, info AGAINST your argument is still useful as it tells you what to cover to convince people who don’t agree with you.

Finding Reliable Information

1. Who is the author/creator?
2. Why was the source created?
3. When was the source created?
4. Who was the intended audience?
5. What type of source is it? (is it typical?; was it private or public?; does the type of source usually have a particular aim/slant?)
6. Is something missing from the source?

Clues to the Reliability of Websites

1. .org, .gov, .edu, .ac (not .com)
2. Ads – having them
3. Commercial sites – avoid
4. Links/references – do they have reliable ones
5. Non-professional/spelling errors etc – bad sign
6. No author