



How to Find Relevant Sources

An important component of many writing assignments is finding appropriate sources to support your thesis and main points. This is often more challenging than it seems.

What Are Relevant Sources?

Relevant sources contain information, articles, charts, illustrations, statistics, and data, etc. that directly address or relate to the thesis statement or support the research question/essay topic.

What Does This Mean?

Suppose you are assigned an essay or research paper for which your thesis is: “the disadvantages of unrestricted cellphone use in high school classrooms far outweigh the benefits.” What type of sources should you consult to substantiate, support, and further this claim?

Common print and digital research sources include:

- Books (a variety of types)
- Periodicals, including newspapers, scholarly journals, mainstream magazines, industry journals/search engines, and scientific publications
- Reference works (mostly in book form)
- Websites
- Maps and government documents
- Databases (e.g., Google Scholar, JSTOR, and KCC’s Library Database)
- Archived materials in other library databases (e.g., historical societies and scientific institutes)

Beware of Internet Search Results

Not all options are relevant or reliable.

For example, some of the results generated by searching for “the disadvantages of cellphone use in high school classrooms far outweigh the benefits” are:

- Facebook (and other social media sites): Posts and commentary are largely opinion-based and should not be used.
- Wikipedia: Highly questionable, as the content is contributed by random members of the public, not necessarily legitimate scholarly individuals.
- Research Gate: Highly reliable and likely relevant. For example, the following abstract was taken from a March 2021 journal article:

Abstract

Despite the potential instructional benefits of integrating devices such as cell phones into schools and classrooms, research reveals that their improper use can negatively impact student behaviour, learning, and well-being. This paper reviews the literature and litigation on cell phone use in schools due to controversies over cheating, cyberbullying, sexting, and searches of student cell phones. Recent studies suggested that the presence of cell phones and related technologies in classrooms could detract from students' academic performances while contributing to higher rates of academic dishonesty and cyberbullying. The growing prevalence of cyberbullying is especially concerning because it can have severely negative, even tragic, effects on student mental health and safety. However, given the relatively discreet nature of cell phone use, regulations about their use can be difficult to enforce. After reviewing literature and litigation on the potential risks associated with inappropriate cell phone use in schools, this paper offers suggestions for educators to consider when devising or revising policies balancing students' individual rights with their safety and well-being before ending with a brief conclusion.

Source: “Cell Phones, Student Rights, and School Safety: Finding the Right Balance” - *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*; Authors: William Smale - Trent University; Ryan Hutcheson; Charles J. Russo

***Tip:** Abstracts like the one above help quickly determine if the source meets your needs by summarizing the content without having to skim entire documents.

Using Keywords and Phrases in Databases

- Define your research question/essay topic by using specific keywords or phrases.
- For example:
 - *Negative versus positive impacts of cellphone use on comprehension in the classroom*
 - *Effects of cellphone use on social interaction and behavior in the classroom*

Check Relevancy and Currency

- Choose sources that are credible AND address the specific aspect of the topic. If they don't, they're likely irrelevant.
 - Example: A scientific journal/magazine article about the general negative aspects of social media on students (but not specifically cellphone use).
- Is the information current (within recent months or years)?
 - When was it published? If the information is relevant and credible, but no longer "holds up," don't use it.

In Summary: Give Sources The "CRAAP Test"

This evaluation method, designed by librarian Sarah Blakeslee at the Meriam Library at California State University, Chico, takes into account each source's:

- **C** - Currency: Is the article or other source current?
- **R** - Relevance: Is the article relevant to my topic (or just mentioned casually)?
- **A** - Authority: Is the author and authority or expert on the topic?
- **A** - Accuracy: Is the information accurate and verifiable?
- **P** - Purpose: The reason the information exists: Is it to inform, teach, sell, entertain or persuade?
 - Do the authors/sponsors make their intentions or purpose clear?
 - Is the information fact, opinion, or propaganda?
 - Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?
 - Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal biases?

Review Questions

1. Which two of the following sources are relevant and reliable for an essay or research paper about the emotional effects of social distancing faced by elementary school children during COVID-19.

- a) The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report: “Children's Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic for probability-based survey results detailing the emotional strain of virtual instruction.”
- b) A Department of Education survey or poll results with opinions from parents of school-age children
- c) Facebook
- d) Peer-Reviewed Medical and Sociological Journal Articles, such as: “Challenges for Child Mental Health Raised by School Closure... for a breakdown of emotional and behavioral outcomes.”
- e) An article in a children’s magazine

2. Which of these is NOT a common scholarly print or digital information source?

- a) Books (a variety of types)
- b) Scholarly or industry journals
- c) Sports or entertainment magazines
- d) Academic or scientific websites
- e) Archived materials in library and other databases, like historical societies and scientific institutes

3. You find the perfect article or report in support of your thesis. It comes from a trusted source, all claims are verified, and provides specific details. However, the publication date is October 12, 2002. Can you still use it?

If “yes”, why?

If “no”, why not?