

Doing Research I

Reliable Sources

The public depends on museums to give accurate, dependable information on the objects they hold and the cultures and ages from which the objects come. Visitors want answers to various questions. How old is it? Where was it made? How was it made? Who made it and why? How was it used? Why was it important? Unfortunately, very few museums have a large staff of curators, people who are experts in specific artifact collections the museum houses. So to gain the object information needed for proper records and labels, staff members look for reliable sources.

What are sources? They are the information references. Books can be excellent sources. People who have already done research in a particular area can also serve as sources. An object with a well-documented origin that is available for study or illustrated and described in a reliable written source is invaluable in the research process. If chosen carefully, websites can give valuable information. All of these sources can be used to gain new knowledge about the world and the objects in it.

Understanding Sources

When doing research, it is most important that the researcher choose his/her sources wisely and understand them well. Here is an example from everyday life that illustrates this point:

A Profitable Lunch

John and his best friend Bill are reading the want ads while eating lunch at McDonalds. John is hoping to find out about openings at Computers R Us. Bill reads to John two ads the company has put in the paper: one for programmers and one for technical support assistants. According to the ads (which for this example are assumed to be true), the starting pay is above minimum wage, the hours are flexible, and employees have good insurance benefits.

At the next table, Kirk, who has been eavesdropping, turns around to say that his cousin Marvin used to work at Computers R Us and that the job was awful. He warns John not to apply. When John asks Kirk why Marvin didn't like the job, Kirk does not know. John talks to Marvin later and finds out that Marvin didn't like the job because he was fired for stealing a brand new monitor from the company. After considering the facts, John applies for the job and is now making big bucks at Computers R Us.

As can be seen through this example, the information given on any subject will vary depending on the source's viewpoint and knowledge. Look at these three sources: Bill, Kirk, and Marvin. Being John's best friend, Bill wants to give him accurate information. He reads John the Computers R Us ads, dependable sources. Kirk had only overheard part of a conversation Marvin had held with someone else and didn't know that Marvin's job was considered awful because he was fired from it. Kirk only wanted to look smart in front of John and Bill; he didn't do proper research so he couldn't give them accurate information. Kirk is not a dependable source. Luckily, John did extra research. By going directly to Marvin, a reliable source, he discovered the truth behind Kirk's information and decided to apply for the job.

Considering the following questions will help the researcher to better understand each source.

Who is the person giving the information?

Is the source a person who has done a lot of research in this area? Is this person respected by others in this field? If the research is on a specific culture, is the person a native of this culture, and if so, from what part of the culture? Both "inside" people (those who are from the culture being studied) and "outside" people (those studying a culture that isn't their own) may make important observations, but they are from different perspectives. It is good to know which kind of person is making the observation when you read the information.

Who is the publisher of the information?

Was the book published by a specific group of people with a specific viewpoint? Was the website published by a respected person or institution, or was it done as a spare-time fun project by an amateur with little knowledge of the subject.

Who are the source's sources?

Look at the source's bibliography. Did the source use dependable sources? Are the sources even listed?

If all of the sources agree on something, the research is simple and easy. If not, the research is normal. As often as not, research brings up as many questions as it answers. But progress is made with persistence and hard work.