

SOURCING ACADEMIC MATERIALS

For an academic report, you're expected to support your arguments and provide evidence, and for this you must use sound, academic sources. If you don't use reliable source material, you won't know if the information is correct and objective, biased, or even a fabrication. By using poor sources, you can lose marks on a seminar paper. Below is an overview of what to look out for when sourcing materials, both on- and offline.

■ What are academic sources?

The most common examples of academic sources are:

- ▶ journal articles
- ▶ published literature
- ▶ published reports

However, these are not the only sources: nowadays, it's possible to use sources like YouTube to get your information. However, this doesn't mean you can use any video off the Internet, and it definitely doesn't mean you can start citing Wikipedia as source material...

Attributes to look out for in your sources include:

- ▶ Is the author a recognized expert in their field? Look at the qualifications of the author(s).
- ▶ What is the main organization involved? What is the background of this organization?
- ▶ Has the article been peer-reviewed? This means that other academics have read through the article before it was published and checked it for accuracy. Academic books and articles in academic journals will have gone through such a procedure.
- ▶ Is the article biased? Ideally, you should look for work that's objective. However, saying that, it depends on what information you're looking for and what you're researching.
- ▶ What sources did the author(s) use? Are they in themselves sound?
- ▶ Is the source aimed at academics (and, yes, that includes you)? Information aimed at academics – from professors to students – tends to provide reliable information.

Sources to be more wary of include:

- ▶ newspaper articles
- ▶ magazine articles
- ▶ opinion pieces
- ▶ unofficial websites

The main reason is that they're not usually academic, and there's the major risk of bias. However, of course, there are exceptions, and, again, it depends very much upon what you're researching.

■ Primary and secondary sources

A **primary source** provides first-hand account evidence. Main examples include:

- ▶ raw data from an experiment or interview you carried out
- ▶ historical or original data, e.g., interview transcripts, diaries, speeches, letters, official records, etc.
- ▶ creative works, e.g., music, art, novels, poetry, etc.

A **secondary source** extracts information from a primary source. For instance, it could discuss the primary source, or use it as evidence. Such sources are useful because you can benefit from the analysis of an expert. Examples include:

- ▶ journal articles
- ▶ magazine articles
- ▶ historical textbooks

For your thesis, you can choose between two main outlines: you can conduct your own experiment(s), and thereby base your thesis on primary sources, supplemented with secondary data; or, you can only use secondary sources, for example, to research a particular concept or analyze a certain policy. Neither is easier nor better: it simply depends on what the focus of your thesis is.

■ Finding sources: online

The Internet is a wondrous resource: not only does it appear to be the portal to everything, but you don't even necessarily have to leave the comfort of your own home to use it. However, as much as it's full of useful material, it's also full of *not* so useful material: it's easier – but also harder – to find bona fide sources. Below are a few ways to make your search for useful information within the World Wide Web somewhat easier.

- ▶ **Use academic search engines:** there are a number of search engines that can help you to specifically locate academic sources. Two of the most popular are **Google Scholar** and **Scopus**.
- ▶ **Search on the websites of journal publishers:** not all of these articles are free, but you can gain access to a large number of abstracts without the need for a payment.
- ▶ **Access the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ):** as its name suggests, this directory provides access to journals free of charge, offering a wide array of subject areas and languages.
- ▶ **Check out the websites of academics, organizations, societies and faculties:** you can access articles and reports directly from the website of a relevant expert or organization. For example, the United Nations offers a wealth of academic and professional reports for free, as well as the majority of non-governmental organizations.
- ▶ **Explore government and legislative websites:** this includes committees, commissions and state annual reports.
- ▶ **Use the Elektronik Journals Library (EZB):** the University of Hohenheim provides access to electronic full-text journals. E-journals licensed to the university are indicated with a yellow dot or yellow-red dot, but you need to be

connected to the Hohenheim network. Simply click on the link below for more information:

<http://rzblx1.uni-regensburg.de/ezeit/search.phtml?bibid=UBHOH&colors=7&lang=de>

- ▶ **Find information using the Database Information System (DBIS):** also provided by the University of Hohenheim, this database can help you to find bibliographic information on relevant articles and literature. If available electronically, it'll link you directly to the EZB. Find out more by clicking on the link below:

http://rzblx10.uni-regensburg.de/dbinfo/fachliste.php?bib_id=ubhoh&lett=l&colors=&ocolors

■ Guidance for online research

Some – if not most – of your research will undoubtedly be online.

- ▶ First of all: **don't be tempted to *only* use online sources.** Good old-fashioned books contain information not attainable from the Internet.
- ▶ Think about **effective keywords** for your search. There's so much information and data online that it can be overwhelming. Have in mind a few keywords to apply when using a search engine.
- ▶ Try out **different search engines.** Different search engines work differently. Apart from Google, you can use, for instance, Bing, Yahoo, Beaucoup (composed of more than 2,500 directories and search engines), or Search Engine Colossus International Directory of Search Engines (composed of search engines from more than 230 countries worldwide).
- ▶ Keep a **note or bookmark of useful websites.** You may also find it useful to keep a note of *unhelpful* websites.

When assessing a website, there are a few questions you should bear in mind:

- ▶ Who is the author (this could be an organization)? What is their background? Who are they affiliated with?
- ▶ Who is the website aimed at (e.g., age range)?
- ▶ When was the website last updated?
- ▶ Is the information provided factual as opposed to simply someone's opinion?
- ▶ Are the arguments based on sound evidence?
- ▶ Does the website provide reliable sources?
- ▶ Is the author objective and not biased?
- ▶ Is the website well-laid out? Are there any grammatical or spelling mistakes?

■ Finding sources: offline

There is, of course, a world outside of your laptop screen. Here are a few offline resources to consider.

- ▶ **Check out Hohenheim's Central Library:** up and running again since 2014, the central library is home to many English and many more German literary works. Check out the main website below for opening times and its location (and don't forget to save a 2 € coin for a locker):

https://kim.uni-hohenheim.de/94991?&L=1#jfmulticontent_c241279-1

If you can't find what you want in the library, then use the inter-library loan option online to order it for a fee of 1.50 €. More information can be found here:

<https://kim.uni-hohenheim.de/95576?L=1>

- ▶ **Visit the Departmental Library:** located in the Schloss, this library contains literature focused on business, economics and social sciences (you'll also need 2 € for a locker). For information on opening times and its location, click on the link below:

https://kim.uni-hohenheim.de/94991?&L=1#jfmulticontent_c241279-1

- ▶ **Ask at your institute of interest:** most institutes at the university have their own library. Make sure you ask a relevant professor or supervisor.
- ▶ **Stuttgart's Municipal Library:** shaped like a giant cube, Stuttgart's Municipal Library can be found in the center of the city. You can buy a borrowing card for a monthly or annual fee at the front desk. More information can be found at:

<http://www1.stuttgart.de/stadtbibliothek/bvs/actions/profile/view.php?id=159>

■ Additional tips

- ▶ **Using personal experience:** personal experience is very compelling, especially within an international institution like the University of Hohenheim. However, there are a few pitfalls in using it:
 - over generalizing – your experiences are not universal
 - using hearsay as fact

Outside academic sources not only consider numerous sources, and rely on evidence and research, but they are usually peer-reviewed by experts. You *should* provide your own opinions – it's important to include original ideas, and show that you have understood and thought about what you've read and researched – but you need to support these with evidence from other sources. For more guidance on this issue, have a look at “**Academic writing style tips**” in this series.

- ▶ **Check the publication year:** in certain circumstances, using “old” information is completely valid, for instance, when you're researching about a particular historical event. But, if you require contemporary data, take the time to look for information that's as up-to-date as possible.
- ▶ **Look at the reference list or bibliography of sources you've used:** this is a great way to find relevant sources and, if it's a new, or fairly new, publication, you should be able to find a number of recently published sources.