

Unreliable Sources

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A key skill in heuristics is determining which kinds of sources and which particular sources are *generally* reliable and *not* generally reliable. This is especially important in writing academic papers: our sources should be generally reliable and meet certain criteria for inclusion.

Here is a list of unreliable sources that should not be used in academic papers, and sources which students of heuristics should be aware of when evaluating information:

Unreliable Sources

As a general rule, there are three kinds of unreliable sources: (1) those which do not meet academic standards of verification; and (2) those sources that tend to be highly unreliable due to the politicized nature of the information, or (3) those sources which stand to gain financially for the information they are given from parties *not related to the subject matter*.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia should *never* be used as an academic source; it has no vetting process (other than sandbox chats, which are not visible on the information pages), and pages are routinely blocked by authors, preventing others from changing or correcting materials. Wikipedia articles can sometimes be useful to orient you in your *personal* initial stages of research, and clickable links in the reference section can sometimes be useful indicators of other sources to explore.

Newspapers & Cable News

Many studies have been published that indicate a clear bias in most of our mass mainstream news outlets. Readers should always be conscious of the fact that journalists are not experts in every field they report on, and when reporting on controversial topics (moral, political, etc) they are frequently biased towards one point of view over another. In the past, it was easier to differentiate “news” from “editorializing” but the two have been conflated more and more over the past two decades to the point where editorials are now presented as news.

It is also important to be aware that the majority of those surveyed in recent polls indicate that they have a deep distrust of the media and so authors should be conscious of this fact, as it impacts on the reliability of your own writing.

See for example a recent Pew Center study [here](#)>.

“Fact Checkers”

Like mass mainstream media, so-called “fact checkers” (such as Snopes and PolitiFact) have been shown to be highly politicized and unreliable, frequently labelling false information as “True” and true information as “False”.

See the Utah Law Review article on Fact Checkers in the menu.

Reliable Sources

As a general rule, **reliable academic sources** should meet the following criteria:

Blind Peer Reviewing

Peer reviewing is the process whereby a panel of experts in any field review an author’s work to see if it is generally within the rules of the discipline. For example, a neuroscientist writing about a certain invasive procedure will have his or her work vetted by a panel of experts to determine if the author knows what they are talking about. Blind peer reviewing means the experts on the panel do not know who the author is (the author’s name is removed in the vetting process) to ensure that there is no “favouritism” in the selection process.

Corroborated

Good sources will also be corroborated or supported by multiple different sources.

Apolitical

Good academic sources should be free from political bias. A conscientious reader will always be on the lookout for suspect writing with a political bias, and it is generally quite easy to identify when an author seems too strongly in favour of one position over another.

Purpose

One can always get a good sense of what an author’s intention is (see Heuristics 01) through the tone, mood, and language employed in the writing. A good critical reader should always be asking, while reading, **“*what does the author want?*”**