Module 3: Exploring Good, Evil, and Noble Sacrifice
Topic 5: Conducting Research

Conducting Research

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Locating and Collecting Sources

1. Narrow down a topic and develop a working thesis.

2. Develop a plan to locate and collect sources.

   Consider the kind of information that may support your argument:
   - Facts
   - Personal accounts or reflections
   - Statistics
   - Expert interpretations

   Ask yourself the following questions:
   - What information most strongly supports my viewpoint?
   - What information could help sway my readers?
   - What information clarifies controversial or confusing notions about my topic?

Once you have narrowed down a topic for your persuasive paper and developed a working thesis, begin your research by developing a plan to locate and collect sources. Just as you would never go to a bakery to purchase new clothes, you likewise do not want to waste time and effort looking for sources in the wrong place. When developing a plan for research, first consider the kinds of information that may support your argument. For example, do you want facts, personal accounts or reflections, statistics, or expert interpretations? If your topic involves science or medicine, such as climate change or stem cell therapy, perhaps you will need information from research studies. A topic such as fighting crime may involve sources that are current events from newspaper articles and interviews with local officials or community citizens. Research for a topic regarding a business or commercial industry may require information from company websites.

In determining what information is most relevant to your topic, ask yourself the following questions:

- What information most strongly supports my viewpoint?
- What information could help sway my readers?
- What information clarifies controversial or confusing notions about my topic?

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Here is a list of potential sources that may offer helpful information in your research:

- **Books or textbooks:** A common source of information can be found in print books or ebooks that cover a wide range of topics. Publishing books often takes a lot of time and resources, so often the information they contain is not as up-to-date as what can be found in current issues of newspapers and journals.
- **Newspapers:** To find information regarding current events and trends, you might want to search newspapers for factual information as well as opinion articles. Some newspapers that have a nation-wide readership tend to be more reliable and have a wider scope of topics.
- **Academic and trade journals:** Articles from academic and trade journals are usually based on research and authored by experts in the field. Some schools and public libraries provide students access to online databases of prominent academic journals and other periodicals.
- **Government reports:** Your local, state, and federal government regularly collects and releases data that serve the public interest. Fortunately, much of this data can be easily accessed online.
- **Film documentaries:** Although some film documentaries may be biased, they can be very helpful in presenting a general overview of an issue, opinions from key figures, and opposing viewpoints.

- **Radio and television broadcasts:** Multimedia sources in the form of audio or video clips of radio and television programs can offer helpful information about a wide range of topics. Such programs often include interviews with people who have first-hand experience or knowledge regarding your topic of interest. Many multimedia sources can be accessed online from the broadcast organization's website.
- **Interviews:** Sometimes the only way to access first-hand knowledge or experience about a topic is through an interview. While you might be able to find interviews that have been conducted and published by a professional, remember that conducting your own interview is also an option for your research.
- **Websites:** Although digital copies of books, articles, and multimedia files are usually accessed and distributed through a website, sometimes the pages of a website itself can offer helpful information in your research. For example, a high-ranking politician may state her platform on her official website, or an expert in a specific field may publish informative posts on his personal blog.

To make the strongest persuasive argument, the majority of your sources should be primary sources. A primary source is a work that provides direct, first-hand evidence and is created in or close to the relevant time period. For example, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, which was written by a teenager named Anne Frank during Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, is a primary source for information regarding events that occurred during the 1940s. An article or book that analyzes Anne Frank's diary would be a secondary source. Secondary sources are works that provide an analysis or interpretation of primary sources. You must be careful when using secondary sources because any misinterpretation or bias on the part of the author may work against supporting your position. On the other hand, secondary sources can be especially helpful when the author is a credible expert on the topic.

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Evaluating Sources: Determining Validity and Accuracy

- Not all sources provide the same level of quality.
- Evaluate sources for validity and accuracy:
  - Identify the author and the author's goal.
  - Look at the title of the work and ask yourself what it may convey.
  - Browse the table of contents and the index.
  - Ascertain whether the content of the work is fact, opinion, or propaganda.
  - Verify the timeliness of the source.
  - Cross-check information against other sources.
  - Consider the language and tone.

Even though your topic is likely to have numerous sources of information, not all of those sources will provide the same level of quality. When selecting sources during your research, it is essential to evaluate sources for validity and accuracy and to only select those that are legitimate and contribute to supporting your thesis.

Follow these suggestions when determining the validity and accuracy of a source:

- Identify the author and the author's goal. Is the author reputable, or does he or she lack credentials or authority on the topic? Does the author have an agenda that could bias the work? Is the work funded by a third-party organization with its own agenda?
- Look at the title of the work and ask yourself what it may convey about the work's contents or the position and authority of its author.
- Browse the table of contents and the index for an overview of the information that is covered in the source. You may find that the work is too broad for your topic.
- Ascertain whether the content of the work is fact, opinion, or propaganda. If the source claims to report factual information, are the facts accurate? Are the sources of the facts or the methods of collecting facts clear and legitimate? If the author is expressing an opinion, does he or she justify that opinion using logical reasoning? Is the argument one-sided, or does the author acknowledge and address opposing viewpoints?
- Verify the timeliness of the source. If new information has been published on a topic, then older sources may no longer be relevant.
- Make an effort to cross-check information against other sources. If you can find the same information cited in numerous valid sources, it is more likely to be legitimate and accurate.
- Consider the language and tone of the work. Is it professional, objective, and respectful? Or does the author use an emotional or angry tone? Are there mistakes in spelling and grammar?

Evaluating Sources: URL Endings

URL Ending	Source of Authorship	Purpose
.com (stands for *commercial*)	Commercial Business or Others	Originally used for commercial purposes to sell a product or service but now open to anyone willing to purchase the domain name, or URL
.edu (stands for *education*)	Education	Maintained by educational institutions such as colleges universities
.gov (stands for *government*)	U.S. Government Institution	Hosted by United States government agencies or sponsored groups
.mil (stands for *military*)	U.S. Military Organization	Hosted or sponsored by United States military institutions or installations
.net (stands for *network*)	Internet Service Provider and Others	Originally used by Internet service providers but now open to a variety of organizations and businesses
.org (stands for *organization*)	Non-Profit Organization	Primarily used by nonprofit groups but now open to anyone
~ or % (used after an extension in a URL address)	Personal Website	Dedicated for personal use

Because it is easy for anyone to publish information and opinions on the Internet, you must be especially careful when evaluating the validity and accuracy of websites. All websites are identified by a URL, or a specific line of characters that define the website's location or identity. Taking note of the URL endings—also called extensions or suffixes—can help you determine the validity of the website. Here is a list of the most common URL endings.

URL Ending	Source of Authorship	Purpose
.com (stands for *commercial*)	Commercial Business or Others	Originally used for commercial purposes to sell a product or service but now open to anyone willing to purchase the domain name, or URL
.edu (stands for *education*)	Education	Maintained by educational institutions such as colleges universities
.gov (stands for *government*)	U.S. Government Institution	Hosted by United States government agencies or sponsored groups
.mil (stands for *military*)	U.S. Military Organization	Hosted or sponsored by United States military institutions or installations
.net (stands for *network*)	Internet Service Provider and Others	Originally used by Internet service providers but now open to a variety of organizations and businesses
.org (stands for *organization*)	Non-Profit Organization	Primarily used by nonprofit groups but now open to anyone
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.net (stands for *network*)	Internet Service Provider and Others	Originally used by Internet service providers but now open to a variety of organizations and businesses
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As you can see, you should limit the use of websites whose extensions end with .com as these can be created by someone who does not have valid credentials or expertise on the topic. Websites ending with .edu or .gov are usually reliable and unbiased.

No matter what the URL ending is, you must evaluate each website carefully to determine its validity and accuracy.

When evaluating websites, you can use many of the same questions that you ask yourself when establishing the validity of print sources. For example, to determine the author of a website, look for links titled "About Us" or "FAQ." Also check to see whether the website is trying to sell you a product or service; financial gain can sometimes be a motivation for bias.

Just like print sources, the appearance of a website can tell you a lot about its validity. Take time to observe the look and feel of the website and note its functionality. Does the website look polished and professional, or is it sloppy and unattractive? Is the site easy or difficult to navigate? Is the site functional, or does it contain a lot of broken links? These features can provide clues as to the attention and care taken in publishing the content of the website.

Evaluating Sources: Making Sense of Information

- Note the main ideas and supporting details from each source.

- Sources may provide conflicting information.

- Determine whether the contradiction is due to:
  - Misconceptions or inaccurate information
  - Misinterpretation of primary sources

- Conduct further research on the conflicting information to gain further insight and resolve the contradiction.
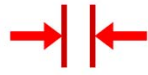
When researching a diversity of sources on your chosen topic, remember to note the main ideas and supporting details from each source. As your research expands, you will likely find that sources may provide conflicting information. If this occurs, you must resolve this conflict by determining whether the contradiction is due to misconceptions or inaccurate information or whether it is due to bias or misinterpretation of primary sources. You can expect to conduct further research on the conflicting information to gain further insight and resolve the contradiction.

As you collect sources to support your thesis, remember to gather information about the opposing viewpoint. You may find it helpful to use a T-chart to organize facts or ideas that are for or against your position.

As you conduct your research, there are generally three ways you can record your findings: summarizing, paraphrasing, and directly quoting.

A **summary** condenses large amounts of text and information into a few sentences. Summarizing an entire research study, law, policy, or event is a good way to add supporting evidence to your paper. If you attempt to outline the entire source in detail, you will lose your reader. Instead, focus on the main points of the source that directly relate to your point or claim. Since you will also be recording the publication information, you can always go back later to refer to the original source if necessary.

A **paraphrase** puts the original text into your own words. Paraphrases are generally shorter than the original material. In order to make certain that your readers understand your evidence, you should paraphrase information that is too technical for the average reader or that uses difficult or complicated language.

A **direct quotation** uses the exact words of a source in your writing. Using a direct quotation from an expert can add strength to your argument. Remember, you have to cite direct quotations just like you must cite summaries and paraphrases. When your source is a true expert on the issue you are arguing, it is a good idea to quote directly because changing the wording of the text may diminish the strength or effect of the words.

While you are conducting research and gathering sources, you should take consistent notes and keep your information organized. The best note-taking system is the one that feels the most comfortable for you to use. You can opt for a handwritten note-taking method or keep track of your notes using a computer- or web-based organization system. Whichever system you choose, be sure to organize both the ideas or facts that you learn from each source as well as the publication information for each source. Documenting publication details will make it easier to credit sources using parenthetical citations and to compose your Works Cited page.

Take a moment to explore two examples of note-taking systems, but feel free to explore other methods as well.

A traditional method of organizing information is to make two sets of index cards or note cards: The first set consists of source cards and the second set consists of fact cards.

A source card is used to document publication information from a selected source, so you will have one card for each source that you plan to use. The exact information on the card may vary depending on the type of source, but in general you should record the author's name, the title of the source, the city or location where the work was published, the name of the publisher, and the date of publication. Also, label each source card with a letter or number so that you can match information to the appropriate source and refer to the source quickly and easily.

Take a look at this example of a source card for a book.
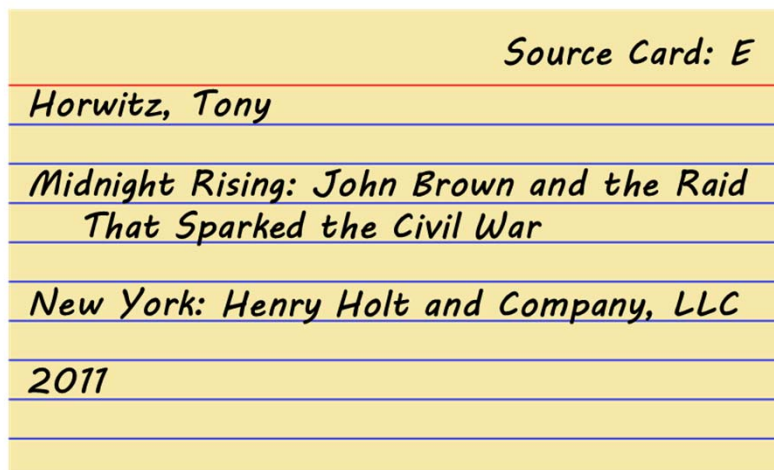
Organizing Sources: Fact Cards

Facts
Ideas
Quotations
Paraphrases
Summaries

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"Douglass therefore regarded Harpers Ferry, not Fort Sumter, as the true start of the nation's great conflict."

Source Card: E

A fact card is used to document facts, ideas, quotations, paraphrases, or summaries from a selected source. You may have multiple fact cards for each source card that you have created. At a minimum, you should document the chapter and/or page number from the source where the information can be found along with the exact quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You can also jot down other ideas on the card, such as your interpretation of the information or further research questions. Also, remember to record on the fact card the corresponding letter or number of the source card so that you can credit the information to the appropriate source.

Take a look at this example of a fact card for a book.

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"Douglass therefore regarded Harpers Ferry, not Fort Sumter, as the true start of the nation's great conflict."

Source Card: E

Organizing Sources:
Source Sheet

Horwitz, Tony. Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2011

1. "Douglass therefore regarded Harpers Ferry, not Fort Sumter, as the true start of the nation's great conflict."

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Note: locate brief overview of what happened at Fort Sumter

An alternative to using note cards is to designate a page or electronic document for each source. These documents are called source sheets. Go through your sources and write down all the necessary source information on one document per source. Using bullets or numbers, write down the facts and/or ideas that you will use from each source on the source sheet below where the source information is recorded. Be sure to include any page numbers where the information can be found. When you have finished your source sheet, review your sources one more time. Is there anything else that you might be able to use? Is there anything else of interest? Do you need more information to support or clarify your points? Add any new points or information necessary to make your argument sound and complete.

Here is an example of a source sheet using a book.

Horwitz, Tony. Midnight Rising: John Brown and the Raid That Sparked the Civil War. New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2011

1. "Douglass therefore regarded Harpers Ferry, not Fort Sumter, as the true start of the nation's great conflict."

p. 287

Note: locate brief overview of what happened at Fort Sumter