

Should I Use This Source?

Four Questions to Ask First

1 Is this Information or Idea Relevant?

Include the information or idea if it *strengthens your argument*. Don't bother with fluff—there's enough to say without it. Avoid interesting distractions. Consider the steps you intend to take from your thesis to your conclusion. Does it fit?

No

Leave it Out

Strong arguments are concise arguments. Irrelevant content will always make your writing weaker.

Yes

2 Is this Information or Idea Well-Known?

Consider your audience. Are they already familiar with this information or idea? If they are, or if they can easily verify it in a common reference work, it is common knowledge.

Facts are not necessarily common knowledge—especially not if your audience can't easily verify them. Information gathered from a *single source*, even if it is available elsewhere, should not be treated as common knowledge.

Um?

If in doubt, cite something. Avoid even the appearance of plagiarism.

No

Yes

3 Is the Source Trustworthy?

A source is trustworthy when it is from an *expert* in a *relevant* field. A molecular biologist might have an opinion about history, but that doesn't make him an expert in history.

More trustworthy sources come from reputable institutions with strict processes for review. Less trustworthy sources come from individuals with little or no accountability and from institutions driven primarily by profit.

The original source of an idea is more trustworthy than a secondhand account. Secondhand accounts can be useful, but if the primary account is available and accessible, use it!

Don't Cite a Source

A citation is unnecessary when the information or idea is familiar to your audience.

Find a Better Source

Check the bibliography of your current source for leads.

No

Found One!

Found One!

Find a Newer Source

Online databases and library catalogs can filter searches by publication date.

No

4 Is the Source Current?

Experts change their opinions over time. Does this represent the author's most recent opinion? Fields of study advance over time. Does this reflect the most recent information and ideas?

There may be good reasons to use old sources; some writings have more staying power than others. But make sure you are familiar with the current state of the discipline.

Yes

Use it!

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οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ

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