Research Basics

Many of your papers will require you to do research using outside sources. Before you begin your research, familiarize yourself with your resources and the basic standards used to evaluate them.

Where to Start
Make your school library your first stop. College and university libraries keep many specialized publications and often provide free access to online research databases. Ask a library staff member for help if you aren’t sure how to use the databases.

How to Choose Sources
To do good research, you must know which sources of information you can trust and use, and which ones you can’t. Keep the following guidelines in mind.

- **Peer-reviewed** articles in academic journals, which you’ll find in college libraries and online scholarly databases, are the most credible research sources. They are written by scholars and experts and are reviewed for accuracy and integrity by other scholars and experts. Books published by university presses are also reliable.
- **Reference books**, like encyclopedias and textbooks, are generally accurate and credible, but they typically provide overviews of topics, rather than in-depth coverage. They are good places to start, but not suitable for forming the bulk of your research.
- **Mainstream** books, magazines, and newspapers, like Time and the New York Times, are less credible than peer-reviewed scholarly works or reference books. They are often written by professional writers rather than subject matter experts and are typically aimed at a general audience, rather than at experts or scholars. Because the publishers employ fact checkers, however, the information found in these publications is generally factually accurate.
- **Government and university websites**, recognizable by the .gov and .edu web addresses, are generally reliable sources of information and statistics.
- Mass media websites, like cnn.com, are best used for current events coverage.
- **Other websites**, such as blogs and personal websites, are best avoided. The authors may not be qualified to write credibly on their topics or may be biased.

Using Wikipedia
Most instructors do not accept Wikipedia as a research source. Wikipedia’s pages can be written and edited by anyone with Internet access. Errors and misinformation are not corrected until pages have been published and are viewable by the public. Wikipedia can provide a good starting point for users to become familiar with a topic, however, and the footnotes found in many Wikipedia entries often lead to more credible sources of information.