



Why Use Sources?

College writing assignments generally ask you to respond in some way to sources. Some assignments will require you to consult only sources assigned in class, while others will require you to locate your own sources relevant to a specific research topic. In many of your courses, your research will focus primarily on written texts such as books and scholarly articles, but you may also be asked to consult a variety of other sources, including letters, diaries, films, works of art, data from experiments, numerical data, surveys, and transcripts of interviews.

What constitutes a useful and reliable source will vary according to both your assignment and the methods used in a particular field of study. As you approach a paper in an unfamiliar field, it will be important to remember that within each field of study, scholars distinguish between primary sources, or the raw material that they analyze as they attempt to answer a question, and secondary sources, or the analyses of that raw material done by other scholars in the field. For example, for literary scholars, primary sources include fiction and poetry, while secondary sources include criticism written by other scholars about those literary texts. Historians, on the other hand, grapple with primary sources such as letters, diaries, and eyewitness accounts produced at the time of an event, as well as with secondary sources such as arguments presented by other historians. Sociologists tend to rely for raw material on quantitative data, such as surveys, censuses, and other statistics, or qualitative data, such as observation and interviews.

Social scientists in some fields, such as psychology and economics, also consider empirical journal articles (articles that describe the results of original research) published in peer-reviewed journals to be primary sources. These articles provide raw material for other scholars, who may then raise questions about the published results or develop new research based on these results. Social scientists in other fields, such as anthropology and history, however, do not consider research articles primary sources because articles in these fields do not typically present raw data. For these social scientists, journal articles would be secondary sources. For all social scientists, literature reviews and published books are considered secondary sources.

Natural scientists consider empirical articles published in peer-reviewed journals to be primary sources. These published results of experiments and analyses of data provide the raw material for other scientists to consider as they pursue their own research. Secondary sources in the natural sciences include literature reviews and books.

As a college student taking courses in many different fields, you will need to ask questions about what is considered a reliable source in each new field, and about how sources can be used appropriately in that field. At the same time, there are many common principles for using sources effectively that you will be able to carry with you from course to course. For more





information on using sources in different disciplines, you can consult the [Harvard Writing Project series](#) of writing guides for specific courses and concentrations. If you are writing a paper for a course in the Government department, you should consult [GovWrites](#) for guidance. If you are writing for an anthropology course, you should consult [AnthroWrites](#). If you are writing for a course in one of the Life Sciences fields, you should consult [ScienceWrites](#).

When in doubt, of course, you should always consult your instructor.





What Are You Supposed to Do with Sources?

No matter what sources you consult, it's important to understand what you're actually doing with sources when you use them to write a paper. It's also important to understand why writing papers is such a significant component of your college education. While you may be asked to provide a summary of other people's ideas for some assignments, most of your writing assignments at Harvard will ask you to answer a question or series of questions—either posed by you or posed for you by your instructor. Your answer to a question will generally come in the form of an argument in which you make a claim, marshal evidence to support it, analyze that evidence, and cogently explain to your readers why you have taken this position. The strongest arguments in any field are those that don't simply repeat what has already been said, but instead survey the relevant data, arguments, or documents—i.e., the sources—and, taking those sources into account, offer an original response to the question.

When you consider sources as you seek to answer a research question, you are engaging with the work of scholars in your field and the work that they have written about. By doing so, you are joining the ongoing conversation about ideas that your professors and TFs have introduced you to in lecture and seminar, and that they themselves engage in as they conduct their own research and do their own writing. If you think of your work as playing a part in this larger conversation, it becomes easier to understand what you are doing with sources in your own writing: you are responding to and building on the work that has come before your own.

As you consult sources, you should ask yourself questions about what a source adds to your understanding of a topic and how it might be helpful to you as you write your own paper. For example, a source might help you answer the question you've raised, or it might raise another question for you that suggests a path for further research. A source might influence your thinking about a particular topic or question, but it might also contradict your thinking, which would require you to do more research to figure out how to understand this conflicting point of view.

The question you are trying to answer will determine the types of sources you consider within a specific field, as will the scope of the paper you're writing. For example, if you are writing a close reading paper about a poem, you will likely be expected to focus only on the poem itself. For another assignment, you may be asked to consider how other critics have responded to that poem, and so your sources would be articles by those critics. Similarly, if you are asked to analyze an author's argument about how to combat climate change, that argument may be your only source—or you may consider that argument in relation to a larger context that includes historical documents, arguments by other scholars, and other sources.

If you are asked to write a literature review paper for a psychology course, your sources will include journal articles that report studies on your topic. If you were writing a senior thesis about the same topic, you would consider those articles, but you would probably also produce your own raw data through interviews or other studies.





Just as the ideas you develop in a paper will be shaped by your response to the sources you consider, the ideas presented by the scholars you read in your courses are built on their responses to the sources they consulted. This is important to keep in mind as you begin the process of writing papers and as you think about what it means to make an original claim. It's also important to remember that your plans for a paper can—and should—be shaped by what you encounter in a source. You may start out with one assumption and then end up shifting gears when you read something that convincingly challenges that assumption. Or you may find that a source raises a question that prompts you to revisit your original assumption.

For more information on the ways that sources function in a paper, and for advice about how to make them work most effectively in your own paper, consult the section of this guide on [integrating sources](#).





Writing "Original" Papers

Some of your writing assignments at Harvard will explicitly ask you to present an "original" thesis, claim, or idea. But even when the word "original" isn't mentioned, you should assume that your professor expects you to develop a thesis that is the product of your own thinking and not something drawn directly from a source. Occasionally an assignment will require only a summary of your reading, particularly if the instructor wants to make sure you have understood a particularly complex concept; however, some assignments may be worded in a way that leaves expectations ambiguous (you may be asked, for example, to "discuss" or "consider" a source), and you may think you are only expected to summarize when, in fact, you are expected to make an argument. When in doubt about whether you are supposed to make an argument in your paper, always check with your instructor to make sure you understand what you're expected to do.

The expectation that you will say something original in every college paper may seem daunting. After all, how can you, an undergraduate who has been studying a particular subject for as little as one semester, know enough to make an original contribution to a field that your professor may have spent a career studying? Indeed, it would be impossible for you to come up with an idea for every paper you write that no one has ever thought of before, and your instructors realize this. When they ask you to come up with an original idea, they may be signaling different expectations, depending on the context of the assignment. Below, you'll find a general framework for thinking about originality in different situations you will encounter in college.

Writing Situation #1: Short Non-Research Papers

In the context of certain assignments, it's enough to come up with a thesis that's original to you—a thesis that you arrived at after thinking about the material you read, rather than an idea you encountered in one of the assigned sources. This will be true for the papers you write in Expos, as well as for many of the short papers you write in your Gen Ed and concentration courses. For these papers, your instructor does not expect you to come up with an idea that no one else has ever written about. Instead, your instructor is most interested in your thought process, your analytical skills, and the way you explain why you think what you think. But why, you may be wondering, would anyone bother writing a paper that presents an idea that other scholars have written about already?

Here's the short answer to that question: There is real value in discovering an idea for yourself, selecting the best evidence to support it, and taking the necessary steps to argue for it. Taking these steps helps you learn both what you think about a topic or issue and how to think through a problem or set of problems. This kind of thinking is necessary preparation for the longer projects you'll do later in your college career when you will be expected to say something truly original. It's impossible to tackle those projects—from a senior thesis to original lab research—if you haven't had the experience of arriving at an idea, fleshing out an argument, and presenting it to an audience. This preparation will serve you well as your college coursework becomes more





specialized, and it will also benefit you when you leave college. Whatever field you go into, you'll find yourself in situations where your analysis of a particular problem—and your use of sources to solve that problem—will be crucial to your success.

While the specifics of the assignments for short papers will vary, remember that whenever you're asked to make a claim, you're expected to do your own thinking. In other words, writing a paper about a claim that has been worked over in class, in section, or in your readings will not leave you room to do much thinking of your own. Nor will writing a paper about a claim that will strike your readers as obvious, simple, and unarguable. If you are interested in an idea that has come up in class, or one that seems obvious, you should work on extending or complicating this idea, or coming up with a counterargument that changes the way the idea should be considered. Also, keep in mind that when your instructors tell you not to consult outside sources, they are often doing so precisely to encourage your original thinking, and you should follow their instructions. When an assignment specifies that you avoid outside sources, you should generally take this to mean that you should not do any outside reading in preparation for the assignment.

Writing Situation #2: Short Research Papers and Term Papers

When you are assigned a research paper or term paper for a course, you will often be asked to write 10–20 pages in which you respond to [sources you identify and locate yourself](#). As with the shorter papers you write for your courses, you will generally not be expected to come up with an idea that has never been considered before (although your instructors will certainly be pleased if you do). So how will you know if your idea is original enough?

The key to answering this question is to think carefully about the context of the course and to decide what's reasonable for you to do given the scope of the assignment. For example, if you've been asked to find five sources of your own, your paper will not be original enough if your argument simply echoes one of these sources, or if it echoes a source that was assigned in class. On the other hand, if you locate three sources, each of which offers different answers to the same question, your paper will be original if you can make your own argument for which answer makes the most sense and why.

Your argument will not, however, be original enough if you make the same argument as one of the sources without acknowledging why that source makes the strongest argument. For example, if you were writing about climate change and you were asked to read and consider an argument for investing in nuclear energy and an argument against investing in nuclear energy, you might agree with one of those arguments and present your argument for why it is the stronger idea. Or you might decide that both arguments fall short. You might decide that you support or oppose investing in nuclear energy for reasons other than those offered in the source's argument. Or you might decide that the argument opposing nuclear energy misses a key factor. The result of doing your own thinking about the topic would be a paper that does not simply restate the position of one of your sources but, rather, uses those sources to inform your own thinking. And the process





of writing that paper would have gotten you closer to figuring out what you think about the topic. When you are doing research, it's always a good idea to check in with your instructor to make sure that you are not overlooking important work in that field and that the sources you are choosing are significant and appropriate for your project.

Writing Situation #3: The Junior Tutorial and Senior Thesis

When you write a substantial piece of work that takes a semester or more (like a junior tutorial paper or a senior thesis), the expectations for originality are different because of the length of the essay you'll write and because of your level of expertise in the field. As you gain experience in your concentration, your knowledge of the major ideas in your chosen field will expand, you will develop your ability to ask more rigorous questions in that field, and you will be able to answer those questions in ways that are original not just to you but to your readers. At this point in your college career, you'll have had the opportunity to learn who the major thinkers are in your field and how to identify the important literature on what research has taken place on your topic. You'll be able to find the most important current scholarship on a topic or the most recent findings related to your research question. Your expertise, along with the time you'll have to devote to the project, means that you will be well-equipped to say something original about your topic.

Even when you write these longer papers, it's still important to understand what it means to say something original. Academic work is very specialized, and scholars build theories and ideas based on the knowledge and ideas that they have studied. In practical terms, this means that ideas evolve slowly, and every original idea doesn't have to be $E=mc^2$ or Kierkegaard's "leap of faith." While there's nothing wrong with hoping to discover a new element to add to the periodic table or trying to figure out the true identity of Shakespeare, it's more likely that your ideas will be original in any of the following ways.

You might discover, in your study of a particular topic, that no one has considered a question or problem that interests you. Or you might bring new information or a new perspective to a question that others have asked. For example, you might look at newly released government documents to consider a question about how the Reagan administration shaped economic policies. While the question may have been asked before, the newly available data will allow you to provide a fresh, original perspective. Similarly, while many people have written about Shakespeare's plays, you might find that comparing a new production to a more traditional version would bring you a fresh perspective on the play.

Sometimes collecting and analyzing your own data will provide an original take on a topic. For example, if you were writing a senior thesis in a lab science or social science concentration, you might collect and analyze your own data in pursuit of an answer to a question that other scholars have attempted to answer before with different types of data. In psychology, for example, you might conduct an experiment under the supervision of a professor and then analyze your data. In





a sociology or anthropology course, you might conduct a series of interviews and analyze them in order to answer a question in a new way.

As appealing as it might seem to discover an entirely new idea, it's just as valuable to add a new step or a new way of thinking to an idea that someone else has already presented. It's also valuable—and original—to consider ideas in relation to each other that have not been considered or connected to each other in this way before.

Whether you're working on a short assignment or a semester-long project, remember that even in the context of all the thinking that has come before yours, you are always capable of bringing your own unique point of view to a paper. In fact, you're doing your own thinking all the time, long before you start writing—in class discussion, in the dining hall, and in your instructor's office hours. When you bring sources into the equation, you're able to go beyond your gut reactions and feelings ("capitalism is good" or "capitalism is bad") to develop more nuanced ideas ("capitalism does a better job of creating incentives for innovation than other systems" or "a capitalist society cannot protect the most vulnerable"). Sources also introduce you to competing arguments and interpretations and help to lay the groundwork for your own thinking. When you read what has already been written on a particular topic, or when you analyze data that has already been produced in addition to new data, you become more qualified to contribute to the conversation.

Many students tackling college-level writing for the first time find the expectations of college writing new and difficult. There are resources to help you as you embark on your writing assignments at Harvard, and you should feel free to make use of them. [Writing Center tutors](#), [Departmental Writing Fellows](#), and House tutors are all excellent resources. [The Harvard Writing Project](#) publishes a number of guides to writing in different fields, and the Writing Center offers [general writing resources](#) in addition to individual conferences.

Before you can use sources effectively, you need to know how to locate them, how to know if they are reliable, and how to distinguish clearly between the ideas in a source and your own ideas. The information on this site provides an introduction to the research process, including [how and where to find sources](#), how to decide [if a source is reliable and useful](#), how to [use sources accurately and effectively](#) in your papers both to strengthen your own thinking and writing and to avoid plagiarism, and finally, how to [integrate source material](#) into your writing and how to [cite sources responsibly](#).

What Does It Mean to Be Controversial?

Most of your college writing assignments will instruct you to take a position or to make an argument. While it's important to learn how to weigh the evidence and draw conclusions that may be different from those of other scholars, it's also important to remember that in academic writing, the most controversial position isn't necessarily the strongest one to take. It might be





tempting to manufacture a controversial argument by over-generalizing or caricaturing the ideas you oppose, but ultimately this kind of argument will be neither convincing nor interesting. Any argument you make should be the result of careful thought, and it should follow from a fair reading of the evidence available to you.

Consider, for example, an essay that Aishani Aatresh wrote for her ESPP class, Technology, Environment, and Society. In the paper, Aatresh tries to answer the question of why hydrogen-powered vehicles have not been as successful as electric vehicles in the United States. While it would have sounded most controversial to argue something like “hydrogen-powered vehicles will always be too dangerous because hydrogen is so flammable,” or “hydrogen-powered vehicles are inferior to electric vehicles in every way,” Aatresh’s research suggested that this type of statement would oversimplify a complex situation. She ended up with a thesis that is still controversial in the sense that readers may disagree with it, but one that does not depend on over-simplifying the issues at stake.

Here is the thesis statement she drafted:

Instead of being a contest of modes of sustainability or “superior” technology, FCEVs largely fit into familiar modes of movement while EVs represent elite, material, and innovative “progress” and thus are differentially situated in American society based on how these visions relate to the idea of independence.

With this thesis statement, Aatresh was able to use the evidence that she uncovered to take a position on a controversial topic (alternative fuels) that was both nuanced and arguable.





Using Sources Beyond Harvard

Writing in Business—by Vaughn Tan '05, '14 PhD

An organization often needs to develop plans or strategies for action and to persuade people both inside and outside the organization that these plans will lead to success. The job of developing and explaining pieces of an organization's strategy frequently falls to its employees. As someone tasked with developing a strategy (say, for a new product line), you may need to consult sources such as industry reports, economic indicators from federal sources, and internal analysis documents. You'll then have to make a persuasive case about the proposed strategy so that decision-makers adopt it. To do this effectively, you may need to draw on sources such as analyses of previous product launches, news reports of competitors' activities, financial reports, and projections.

Writing in Law—by Nora Flum '07, HLS '11

As a new associate at a law firm, you will likely be asked to determine if the law supports your client's position. To do this, you will begin to research cases, looking for precedents and analyzing them for fact patterns that can be analogized to your situation. You will also look for legal doctrines and patterns of logic that can be imported into your argument to organize the structure of your propositions. You might also conduct a historical analysis, researching the legislative history to understand why a particular law was passed and how the historical perspective should impact its current application. Additionally, you could look through law reviews and academic journals for broad theoretical perspectives that inform the way you approach the problem.

Once you have done your research, you will need to write up your conclusions in the form of an argument that the partner can use to make the case.

Writing in Medicine—by Alon Geva '05, HMS '10

As a medical student, you are asked on a regular basis to write admission notes and discharge notes about patients. At first, you may find yourself transcribing every piece of information you learn from the patient, no matter how disjointed, along with every other bit of available data from other physicians and from laboratory results. After your first few attempts, you may be told that your notes are muddled, disjointed, and difficult to follow. When you begin to think of your task as one of analyzing available sources and distilling the most salient details from each, your notes will take shape, and you will be able to present a clear thought process to the other doctors involved in a patient's care. Your notes then become an argument for what those doctors should consider as they make a diagnosis, and you are contributing to the patient's care by ensuring that





the attending physicians can readily see what evidence supports the working diagnosis, what evidence does not, and what information is still missing.

