

Readers of Popular Sources Often Expect

- Familiar characterizations and descriptions
- Appeals to value and emotion
- References to popular issues, places, and people

Researchers also should consider the publication cycle of their sources. Does the source get updated weekly? Monthly? Every three years? Has it been reprinted from an original publication? If it's an online source, has anyone taken responsibility for updating the information? Have updates attempted to address changes in the issue? Such questions point to the way information is handled—and what is published. Book publishers, for instance, are less apt to print ideas that are bound to fluctuate on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Instead, they publish work that will remain relevant through time. If the source does deal with issues that fluctuate (the stock market, important political figures, fashion trends, health care legislation), then researchers should expect sources to monitor those changes and deal with them accordingly. (These issues also correspond to timeliness, one of the criteria for evaluating sources. See page 457.)

ACTIVITY

In a small group, develop a list of imaginary publication failures—instances when the source does not match the audience's expectations. For example:

- An article about lowering one's cholesterol in a punk rock magazine
- A report on best deals among L.A. marijuana distributors published in *Time* magazine
- A lengthy article about shifting epistemological assumptions in literary criticism published in *Sports Illustrated*

UNDERSTANDING COMMON SOURCE TYPES

As more sources move to the Internet, distinctions among them become difficult to detect. But distinctions are crucial to understanding how sources work and what they offer. The following section explains some key features of source types.

Books and e-books

Books and e-books come in a huge variety: fiction (novels, short story collections) and nonfiction (everything else), textbooks (like *The Composition of Everyday Life*) and trade books (everything sold outside of college curricula), and single-authored books and edited collections. One need only browse a bookstore to understand the immense number of subject

categories. For academic research, it's important to remember that books generally take years to write, revise, and publish, so they are not the timeliest source of information. People don't value books for their timeliness but for their depth and richness, for their potential to reveal complexity, history, and the subtle nuances within a topic.

Like all sources, books exist in a conversation, but it may take place over years, decades, even centuries. In other words, with a book, the context may be more difficult to detect than with a tweet, blog, or article. The author(s) may be responding to a claim made long ago. Authors and publishers know this, and they have created some tools to help readers get a sense of the context. For instance, on the back cover and inside sleeve of print books, publishers often tell readers about the nature of the broader conversation. They explain how the work responds to a trend, how it engages a problem or debate, and how it contributes something new. In print and e-books, authors (or editors) use the preface and introduction to explain how their work fits into or responds to a tradition.

Periodicals

Periodicals include magazines (for a general audience), journals (for a specialized audience), and newspapers (both local and national). Popular magazines, such as *People* or *Newsweek*, offer information about mainstream news but rarely provide in-depth analysis of issues, and even more rarely deal with issues outside of major social and political topics. However, some magazines support in-depth reporting. *Harper's* magazine and *The New Yorker*, for instance, are well known for publishing incisive articles that go beyond common perspectives. Even entertainment magazines such as *Rolling Stone* often publish lengthy analytical articles on current issues or significant political figures.

Scholarly journals, which are usually specific to one discipline (such as English, engineering, nursing, business, or marketing), offer very detailed analyses and well-developed opinions on an endless range of topics. The writing in academic journals is most often well researched and well documented, so it tends to be more reliable than that of popular magazines. It may also use discipline-specific jargon that could confuse nonexperts.

At first glance, journals and magazines may look alike, but closer inspection will reveal significant differences. Generally, journals are written for academic or highly specialized readers. The articles explain new theories or practices in a field of study (sociology, psychology, nursing, English, chemistry, history, etc.). The goal of academic articles is not necessarily to communicate an opinion but to explain a new idea and thereby help the discipline, as a whole, to evolve. Magazines are written for general readers, who may have an interest (politics, mountain climbing, hunting). If you are not certain what kind of periodical you have, use the following criteria:

Journals

- Seek to advance knowledge in a *field of study*
- Deal with principles, theories, or core practices in an academic discipline

- Are associated with a discipline or field of academic study
- Have few advertisements, which usually appear only at the beginning and end (not between or among articles)
- Have few colors and flashy pictures (unless they are related to a study or article)

Magazines

- Report information/news or offer how-to advice
- Offer the latest technique in a hobby or sport
- May appeal to readers with a particular *interest*
- Have advertisements throughout the pages, even interrupting articles
- Tend to have more colors and pictures

Newspapers

Newspapers are most valuable for highly publicized topics—those that are or have been visible to the public eye: political events, public figures, national or local disasters, and significant cultural events. For this reason, the context of a newspaper article is fairly easy to detect. The headlines alone help readers to understand the issue, the rhetorical or political tension, and the people involved. For instance, we don't have to think much to understand the context of this *New York Times* headline:

“How Trump Chose His Supreme Court Nominee”

For the most part, newspapers give the latest updates on current issues but refrain from giving lengthy background information. There are exceptions. For instance, *The New York Times* still funds, supports, and features lengthy analyses of political and cultural issues. But generally, newspapers are records of daily or weekly events more than tools of deep exploration.

Although the move to electronic publication has shrunk the number of printed newspapers, researchers still have access to a staggering number of local and national titles, which are increasingly available online, such as the following: *Afro American*, *American Banker*, *Amsterdam News*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Denver Post*, *Detroit News*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Muslim Journal*, *The New York Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *Times-Picayune [New Orleans]*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*.

Government Documents

Government documents include reports, transcripts, pamphlets, articles, speeches, books, maps, and films. State, local, and federal government bodies have accumulated huge

amounts of information about everyday life. Government websites may be the best sources for researching general behavioral trends: what we purchase, how we live, how we get sick, how we heal, what we drink, what we eat, how we vote. Although the U.S. government is the nation's largest publisher, state and city governments publish as well. Such documents, which can be of great value in one's research, can be found online with keyword searches or by going directly to the U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO) website at www.gpo.gov.

Reference Works

Reference works such as encyclopedias and almanacs are sources about sources. In other words, reference works give a general overview about the scholarship on a given topic. They explain what has been thought and said about key issues in a field. Particularly helpful reference works are topic-specific encyclopedias. Consider, for instance, the following titles, which represent a huge number of specialized reference books:

- Encyclopedia of Popular Culture*
- Catholic Encyclopedia*
- Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*
- Encyclopedia of Literary and Cultural Theory*
- Encyclopedia of Counseling*
- Encyclopedia of Chemical Technology*
- The Encyclopedia of Phobias*
- The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*
- Encyclopedia of Popular Music*
- The Encyclopedia of Quantum Physics*

Researchers often consult reference works early in the process—as a way of gathering keywords or concepts that they use for further searches.

Audiovisual Materials

Audiovisual materials include videos, CDs, DVDs, films, photographs, and any type of recording. As organizations and governmental bodies increasingly move to digital storage, researchers can access a growing body of online recordings. For example, the Academy of American Poets offers videos of poets reciting their work; organizations such as Amnesty International offer video reports; and many governmental sites now include recorded speeches and video updates.