

Part A Understanding your reading

Article extract

The results of our study demonstrated that in the general Slovenian adolescent population, some of the reasons for using DS were clearly associated with the extent of PA [physical activity]. In contrast to these results, the only similarly conducted study performed until now in young adults³⁸ revealed no effects of exercise level on the reasons for using DS.

The current study demonstrated that in the general Slovenian adolescent population, males more strongly emphasized purportedly sports performance-enhancing effects of DS, whereas females were more concerned with preventing of illness and disease. This was true for both nonathletic and athletic adolescents. This was in accordance with other qualitative⁴ and quantitative studies.^{18,19,22} Of those studies, only 9 papers were found that reported percentages of adolescents/young adults, who stated specific reasons for using DS.

Adapted extract from: Kotnik, K., Jurak, G., Starc G. and Golja, P. (2017) 'Faster, Stronger, Healthier: Adolescent-Stated Reasons for Dietary Supplementation', *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour* 49(10), p.821.

What is a 'reliable' source?

A reliable source is one where the information is as correct and complete as possible.

- **Named sources** can be assessed for credibility more effectively than anonymous ones because the trustworthiness of a source depends heavily on who has written it. This is important to remember with regard to website material; if you don't know the person or organisation who wrote the information on the website, you can't use it for academic work.
- **Checked sources** (also called peer-reviewed sources) will be more reliable than those that have not been checked. These are sources that have been assessed by experts in the field before being published (see 'academic and scholarly sources' below).
- **Non-biased sources** will be more reliable than more biased ones. For example, material published by political organisations might be biased, because the information will be manipulated and presented in a way that best suits the author's own purposes. Bear in mind, however, that no source can be entirely non-biased, and that even the authors of academic journal articles are trying to persuade you to a particular point of view, and so may manipulate ideas and facts slightly to suit their own viewpoint.
- **Current sources** are more reliable than older ones, simply because they *are* more up to date. You may want to read older sources that are key texts or to build up

your knowledge, but for most topics you will also need current material. Always check online sources to see when they were last updated.

- **Primary sources** will be more reliable than secondary material. Authors of secondary sources might intentionally or unintentionally report the primary material incorrectly or in a biased way. In reality, it is not always possible or necessary to use only primary sources, but your tutor will expect you to read key primary material.

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Top tip



Although the above holds true for the types of sources you will most commonly need for your assignments, you do need to think about what 'reliable' means for the type of information you are looking for. If, for example, your essay is about opinions in the media, then newspapers and television programmes will be reliable sources for this particular type of information, even though these sources may not be checked by experts and will be biased. Similarly, if you are writing about the views of different political organisations, then their leaflets and websites will provide reliable information on what these views are, even though such information may not be balanced or reliable in the general sense of the word.

What is an 'academic' or 'scholarly' source?

When tutors talk about academic or scholarly sources, they usually mean ones that have been peer reviewed, in other words, checked by an expert before publication. Most books undergo this peer review as part of the publishing process, and articles published by an 'academic', 'scholarly' or 'peer-reviewed' journal will have been sent to experts for review and checking. Tutors often use the terms *academic*, *authoritative*, *reliable*, *reputable*, *scholarly* or just *good* interchangeably to mean sources that have been checked in some way, or at least written by a subject professional (although *scholarly* can also just mean well written and researched).

Note that peer review is not the same thing as a film or book review. Book reviews are pieces in which the author gives their personal opinion, and include the book and article reviews commonly found towards the end of academic journals.

Is a reliable source the same thing as an academic one?

Although tutors sometimes use these terms to mean the same thing, you will see from the explanations above that an academic source is usually a reliable one, but that a reliable source is *not* always an academic one, as in the example of using a newspaper as a source of information on opinions in the media.

Part A Understanding your reading**Non-academic sources**

Below is a list of source types that are not academic and should not normally be used as source material for university essays:

- encyclopaedias (including Wikipedia);
- newspapers (including long articles in quality papers such as *The Times* or *The Guardian*);
- magazines (including quality magazines such as *The Economist*, *Newsweek* and *New Scientist*);
- news or TV channel websites (e.g. BBC News);
- trade publications and company websites;
- publications and websites of charities, campaign or pressure groups;
- student theses or essays;
- pamphlets and brochures;
- blogs and wikis.

How can you check that an online source is reliable and academic?**● Check your online databases, search engines and directories**

Some online databases contain only peer-reviewed academic journals, but some of them also contain newspapers, magazines and trade publications, so read the database description to see what types of sources it contains. Be careful when using search engines such as Google or Yahoo, as they contain a mix of reliable, unreliable, academic and non-academic sources, and it can be hard to tell the difference. Google Scholar is better because it contains only literature related to academic work, but you still need to be careful, as not all of this literature is peer reviewed, and it also contains magazines and student theses.

● Check your websites

Be aware that just because an online article is well written, includes statistics and has in-text references, it does not necessarily mean that it has been peer reviewed. Similarly, words such as *journal*, *research* or *volume/issue number*, *Society* or *Research Centre* are increasingly being used by unreliable and non-academic websites. Always check the website's 'home', 'about us' or 'information for authors' pages to see if a journal peer reviews its articles before publication, and if you are still not sure, see what Wikipedia says about the journal.

Take particular care when using online websites that are not part of a peer-reviewed journal. Do a bit of detective work by looking at the site's 'home' or 'about us' page, and/or by stripping back the URL to find the parent website, and also look at what Wikipedia and other websites say about the authors. The most important thing is to find out who wrote the information on the website, and remember that if you can't

find who wrote it, you can't use it. Words that should warn you that an online article is probably not academic are: *magazine, digest, personals, news, press release, correspondent, journalist, special report, company, classified, personals, and advertisement.*

Wikipedia is useful for initial definitions and information, and for providing further references, but it is not reliable or academic enough to use as a source in its own right.



Over to You 2

Would you use these sources?

Read the descriptions below of ten potential sources for five different essay titles. Decide whether you think each source would be reliable or unreliable, reliable but not academic, or reliable *and* academic.

Sources for an essay on government support for people with disabilities

- 1 An article written in July 2010 in an online magazine called *Mobility Now*. It has news, information and stories and is a magazine for people with disabilities. It is published by a leading charity organisation for people with disabilities.

Sources for an essay on youth crime

- 2 A recent online article on ASBOs written by Jane Smith, Home Correspondent. The URL is the online business section of a national quality newspaper.

Sources for an essay on recent developments in stem-cell research

- 3 An online article on stem cells, published jointly by three authors in 2011. The article has a date, volume and issue number. The article is on a website called 'Stem Cells'. This seems to be the title of the journal, and at the bottom of the page a publisher is given: Beta Res Press. In the 'information for authors' section, the website tells authors how to track the progress of their article as it goes through the peer-review process.
- 4 An online science publication that looks like a magazine. It has a news section, advertisements and job sections. It also has an issue and volume

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number. It has an 'about us' page that describes how its correspondents obtain their information by contacting leading scientists, reading scientific journals and websites and attending conferences.

Sources for an essay on developments in animal cloning

- 5 An article from a printed booklet titled 'Animal Cloning' published in 2004. There is a series of booklets, each with a volume and issue number. Each booklet contains a collection of short articles and newspaper and magazine clippings which give a simple introduction to issues and public debate on a scientific topic.

Sources for an essay on business ethics

- 6 A well-written report (which starts with an executive summary) on business ethics in companies. The website is run by an organisation called SEB – Social Ethics in Business. On the 'about' page, the organisation describes itself as part of a network of business organisations that focus on corporate responsibility. Its funders and partners are large national and international business foundations and development agencies.
- 7 An online article entitled 'Business Ethics Guidelines'. The website address is 'Harold Jones International Company'.
- 8 An online article about McDonald's on a website called 'Centre for Management Research'. There is no 'about us' page but there is a homepage stating that the centre is involved in business research, management consulting and the development of case studies and training materials.
- 9 An online article on business ethics found on the website of the 'Centre for Business Ethics' of a university. On the centre's homepage it states that it helps businesses and the community, and offers workshops, conferences and lectures. It also states that the centre publishes its own *Journal of Ethics*.
- 10 An online article about a drinks company's activities in India. The article has no author but is well written and says 'for immediate release' at the top of the page. The website is given as a 'Resource Centre'. The 'home/about us' page states that the centre has evolved from networks and discussions by activists, and describes itself as a platform for movements to publicise their demands and apply pressure to governments.

(The articles and websites are fictitious but closely based on real examples.)

Five steps for deciding what to read

Step 1 Make sure you understand your assignment title

If you are reading for an assignment, break down the title and check that you really understand it. For example, does it ask you to develop an argument, give your opinion, use examples, or some of these things together? Does it ask for definitions, information on a process, advantages and disadvantages or for different views on an issue?

Rewrite the title in your own words – this is an excellent way of checking whether you really understand it. For example:

Essay title: 'Outline what business ethics is and discuss whether it is important.'

Student rewrite: *Give a brief overview of what business ethics is – define it. Then argue that business ethics either is or is not important, saying why you think this and backing up your argument with sources.*

Step 2 Think about what you already know

Think (and perhaps write down) what you already know and think about the essay question. For example, if you were preparing for the business ethics essay, you could first ask yourself what *you* think business ethics is and whether *you* think it is important.

You will probably already have done some reading on the essay topic during your course, so also think about how this information is relevant to your assignment title.

Step 3 Think about the types of sources you need

Don't be tempted to just type your essay title straight into an online search engine in the hope that something useful will come up. First think about what *type* of information and material you need – this will result in finding more appropriate sources more quickly.

Types of texts to consider might be:

- an introductory textbook to give you some initial ideas;
- chapters in more advanced textbooks;
- case studies to look at real-world examples;
- key established academic books and articles on the topic;
- more recent academic journal articles on new developments or ideas on the topic;
- original data from experiments or other research;
- non-expert and/or biased, subjective material.

In order to select appropriate source types you need to be aware of their purpose, whether they are reliable and whether they are primary or secondary sources. Below is information about this for four common text types.

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Textbooks

For example: Crane, A. and Matten, D. (2016), *Business Ethics*

Textbooks are written for students to give them an understanding of basic concepts and ideas, and to give an informative overview of the subject. They are written in a formal but easy-to-read style. They are reliable sources of information, but be aware that textbooks:

- tend to give a simplified version of information and ideas;
- sometimes present an idea as fact when it is actually something that is debated and not agreed on by all experts in the field;
- sometimes do not give enough detail about the author/source of the information or ideas they discuss;
- are mainly secondary sources because they are giving an overview of primary sources. However, where the authors of the textbook give their own view of a topic the book is a primary source of that viewpoint.

Case studies

For example: 'Launching High-End Technology Products: A Samsung Case Study', <http://businesscasestudies.co.uk>

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Case studies are either real-world or invented scenarios given as an example of a particular principle, situation or concept. Textbooks and student websites often give case studies relating to a particular topic, and other published case studies are written by organisations as an illustration of what they do.

Be aware that case studies:

- sometimes describe real situations but sometimes use invented examples;
- should not normally be used as key sources for an essay because they are designed to be illustrative examples of a point rather than a source of information.

Reports

For example: *Ethical consumer markets report 2017*, Ethical Consumer Research Association and Triodos Bank, 2017

Reports compile or present an account of something. They are often written in order to give recommendations or to find a solution to a particular problem.

Be aware that reports:

- are often requested (commissioned) by a person, group or organisation, and can be biased if the report has been asked for in order to persuade investors, shareholders, voters or other interested parties;
- can be a primary source of data the author has derived through their own statistical analysis (such as the financial performance of the business) or can be

both a secondary source of the data it has collected from elsewhere and a primary source of the recommendations it makes.

Academic journal articles

For example: Carr, A. Z. (1968) 'Is business bluffing ethical?' *Harvard Business Review* 46(1), pp.143–153.

Academic articles are usually written by academics and/or practitioners in the field, and published in what are called academic or scholarly journals. Academic articles present an idea, argument, theory or model, usually supported by their own primary research, data and ideas produced by other academics in the field (secondary data), or a mixture of the two. Academic articles start with an abstract, which is a short summary at the start of the article laying out the context, issue and methodology. The abstract may or may not also give results and conclusions.

Be aware that academic articles:

- have abstracts, which are useful to help you decide whether you want to read the whole article, but that on their own should not be used as a source for your essay;
- are seen as reliable but might still be biased and misrepresent the information or ideas of other authors. If possible therefore, you should check the key primary sources cited;
- are sometimes written in an overly formal and academic style which can make them difficult to understand;
- have reference lists which you can use to find other sources on the topic.

As an example of thinking about source types before searching for material, the student who wrote the essay on business ethics on p.173 decided to look first for textbooks that would give definitions of business ethics. They also realised that they would need some relevant journal articles by key authors for views on the importance of business ethics, and also that they would need reports and government documents for specific data on business regulations and guidelines. Finally, the student decided it would be a good idea to look at some company websites in order to find out what businesses themselves say about their ethics.

Step 4 Do a first search

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The process of finding source material is called a literature search, and is a vital part of academic research. As you search, keep checking that your sources are relevant and reliable.

Another point to bear in mind is that you will need different perspectives on the issue, and that you should try to keep a multi-perspective overview as you progress in your searching and reading, rather than become too focused on the first one or two sources you find.

Headings, content pages and article abstracts will help you decide whether a source is relevant. Reading just the introduction and conclusion is also a quick way of finding

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out whether a source will be useful, and the reference list at the end may provide you with details of further useful material.

Write down the details of each source you think you might use (author, date, title, journal/publisher) and where and how you found it, in case you need to find it again later (see p.40).

Step 5 Refine your search

When you have done your first search, think again about what you will want to say in your essay. This might change as you read more, but you will now probably have some idea of how you want to answer the essay title. Look in more detail at the sources you have found to see which of them are the most relevant, and to check whether you have any important gaps in your material. Check the usefulness of each source you have selected by asking yourself the following questions:

- What type of source is it, and who wrote it?
- Is it a reliable and academic source and if not, is that OK?
- Is it really relevant to specific points in my essay?
- Which chapters or sections of each source are most relevant, and are any sections not relevant?
- Why exactly am I going to read it?
- Do my sources give me different perspectives on the issue?

Top tips

- Spend time on really understanding your assignment title – a common cause of low marks is students not properly understanding what they are being asked to do, and occasionally this is because the assignment title is poorly written. Don't be afraid to ask your tutors about your assignment title, but don't simply ask them what it means; instead, tell them what *you* think the title means and ask them if your understanding is correct – this will show your tutor that you have done some thinking, and will lead to a more useful conversation.
- Do some detective work on any website you are planning to use to find out who wrote it – students quite often think a website is relevant and reliable when it isn't.
- Relevance, relevance, relevance. Keep asking yourself whether the source is relevant and why.

Summary

- Take some time to think about what types of sources you need and why.
- Rather than just typing in a word and seeing what comes up, make your online search as thoughtful and as focused as possible from the start.
- Be clear on whether each source is a primary or secondary source, or a mix of the two.
- Take advantage of the help your university library can give you.
- If you don't know who (or at least what organisation) wrote it, you shouldn't use it.
- Find sources that give different perspectives on the issue.

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