7 CHOOSING AND USING SOURCES

Most of the papers you write for your sociology courses will require sources, and different assignments require different types of sources. But your decisions about sources go far beyond selecting the right type. For a good paper, you'll need to pay close attention to the quality and applicability of the sources, and you'll need to know how to use them effectively. We'll cover these topics in this chapter. In Chapter 8 we cover other aspects of source use, especially the mechanics of citation and strategies for avoiding plagiarism.

Ways to Use Sources

We'll start by helping you understand some basic ways sociologists *use* sources. Knowing how you plan to use a source will help you make smarter choices and maybe save you time as well.

In the humanities, scholars often talk about sources as being either *primary* or *secondary*. However, because sociologists study people (or data about people) rather than texts, this terminology isn't very useful. And besides, a writer can use the same kind of source in very different ways. To help you learn how sociologists work with sources, we've developed a

vocabulary adapted from a system developed by Joseph Bizup. Our four categories for using sources are *Background* (B), *Argument* (A), *Method* (M), and *Theory* (T).

Background Source

A *background* source provides factual stuff. We frequently use these in introduction sections to help readers understand a topic or idea, or show why something is interesting or important. We're also using sources as background when we provide statistics, definitions, and so on. Basically, you are using a source as background when you expect your readers to accept the information you provide without question. If you cite a source to say, "You can trust me on this because it says so here," it's background. In the examples of background sources that follow, notice how the information cited is presented in a matter-of-fact way:

> According to 2009 Monitoring the Future data, the 30-day prevalence of self-reported drunkenness is over five times higher among 12th graders (27.4 percent) than among 8th graders (5.4 percent) (Johnston et al. 2009).
>
> During and following the protest cycle of the 1960s and 1970s, the constitutional protections afforded to public gatherings in the United States with the intent to "petition the government" were widened and specified (Gora et al. 1991; McWhirter 1994).
>
> In 1994, the Senate appropriations committee ordered the NIH to submit a report of funding by death rates, medical spending, and diseases' indirect economic costs (Agnew 1996). That same year, the Congressional Research Service produced a report of NIH funding and mortality rates for the leading causes of death (Johnson 1994).

Primary and Secondary Sources

You might hear sources referred to as *primary* or *secondary*. These terms can be confusing because they mean different things in different disciplines. In fields like history or literature that primarily interpret texts, these terms are used frequently. For those folks, primary sources are the things they interpret—poems, films, private journals, government documents, and so on. But sociologists don't often refer to sources as primary or secondary. If they do, primary refers to reports of original research—the articles your sociology professors publish in journals like *American Journal of Sociology* and *Family Relations*. These are papers in which the scientists themselves present their new research. Their intended audience is other researchers in the field, along with professionals in government or policy work who draw on sociological knowledge. If sociologists talk about secondary sources, they're referring to writing about primary sources; this might include review articles that summarize recent research conducted by others on a particular sociological topic. If you write a literature review for a class, you're producing a kind of secondary source.

Argument Source

You use sources as *argument* when you provide readers with evidence or reasons relevant to your claims. Argument sources might support your claim, as in the following example where the author claims that in the 1980s, "virtually every disease could use measures of dollars per death or per patient to claim their disease was underfunded compared to HIV/AIDS":

> For example, in 1984, breast cancer advocate Rose Kushner testified that the federal government was spending $11,000 for each new AIDS patient but only $400 per person diagnosed with breast cancer (U.S. Congress 1984:49).

Here's another example. In this one, the source is presented as a direct (block) quotation:

> In the report, the NIH for the first time listed criteria for priority-setting between diseases. They provided five unranked criteria:
>
> public health needs, scientific quality of the research, potential for scientific progress (the existence of promising pathways and qualified investigators), portfolio diversification along the broad and expanding frontiers of research, and adequate support of infrastructure (human capital, equipment instrumentation, and facilities). (Institute of Medicine 1998:4)
>
> These criteria provide some information about NIH priority-setting while maintaining significant scientific autonomy over funding decisions.

An argument source can also be a stand-in for a person or group espousing a point of view or making a claim about something relevant to your own argument—whether you agree with it or not: "So-and-so says . . . " In our trial analogy, this would be like a defense attorney saying, "The state's attorney wants you to believe that my client . . . " An argument source may state the point or claim explicitly, or it may imply a position or claim. If you believe the point to be valid and relevant, and if you believe your readers will accept the source as a legitimate authority,

you will use the source to support your claim. If you think a source is relevant but has questionable merit, you can cite it in order to argue *against* it. (For detailed instructions on this kind of source use, see Concessions and Counterarguments, p. xx)

You may also use argument sources to show readers the range of positions that are held, which is often they way they are used in Introduction and Literature Review sections of research reports. When used for this purpose, sources are often clustered to show a common and therefore important position:

> **Scholars have argued** that disease advocates successfully lobbied for research funds (Brown and Zavestoski 2004; Dresser 1999; Epstein 1996).

Multiple argument sources can also be contrasted with one another, especially to represent commonly held ideas or positions:

> **Peer selection theorists argue** that substance use is thus an antecedent, not a consequence, of friendship formation (**Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990; Hirschi 1969**). On the other hand, **theories of peer influence suggest** that friendship groups provide intimate settings for individuals to learn behaviors and attitudes, including those related to substance use (**Akers 2009; Bandura 1977; Sutherland 1947**).

An *argument* source may also be used to provide contrast for your own work:

> **Most existing research** treats target populations as a constant feature of policies, often coding the target population directly from the text of bills (Donovan 2001; Schroedel

and Jordan 1998). **In contrast, I argue that** a policy's perceived targets can change over time.

Theory Source

Theory sources basically do what it seems: They provide references to sociological theories or ideas. The sociological world is a complex place, and we can only apply a limited number of sociological ideas or concepts in any single piece of writing. Theory sources show our readers the theoretical lens we are using in discussing our topic or designing our study.

The theory sources sociologists use can usually be sorted into two types. "Classic" (or canonical) sources provide the deep background, connecting the new work to the major ideas and theorists of the field. Contemporary sources, in contrast, are more directly related to the sociologist's current research. In the next example, the authors begin with a reference to the original "classic" source of the theoretical ideas, which sets up their discussion of more recent research:

> A long tradition of sociological work relates remedial actions by norm violators to how social observers perceive them. Goffman (1971) gave perhaps the most compelling picture of the impression management that is needed after an offense. . . . As Goffman (1971:113) put it, "an apology is a gesture through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offense and the part that dissociates itself from the illicit and affirms a belief in the offended rule . . . "
>
> Apologies are effective in reducing anger toward transgressors, and in reducing how much observers wish to punish them (see, e.g., Darby and Schlenker 1982; Ohbuchi et al. 1989; Riordan et al. 1983). Only recently, studies have begun to explore more carefully which facets of apology

> work to reduce sanctions and the mechanisms through which these apologies work. Scher and Darley (1997b) demonstrate that an expression of remorse had a significant impact in reducing [sanctions].

Sometimes papers will have a distinct "Theory" section. More often the theory is interwoven with discussion of other research. (This is typically the case for student research reports.) Regardless of where in the source it appears, when you are talking about the *sociological ideas* behind your hypotheses or interpretation of results, you're using that source to provide theoretical framing for your paper.

Method Source

You use method sources to show that a procedure or approach *you* use in your own work is similar to what someone else did. As a writer, citing a *method* source helps you in two ways: First, if someone else has described in detail something that you are doing, you don't need to describe it in detail again; just give a brief summary and then direct your readers to that source. Second, if you cite a method source that your readers judge to be authoritative and relevant, they will have more confidence in what you're doing.

Not surprisingly, *method* sources are most likely to show up in the Methods section. These sources explain or justify why you did what you did, like this:

> Following a study by the General Accounting Office (1997), I have assumed that the best estimate of the potential donor pool is the in-hospital death rate adjusted for circumstance or cause of death.

However, if a particular procedure or approach is central to your research project rather than just a detail, you may want to mention it briefly (and cite it) in your Introduction:

> We use a two-equation estimation procedure (**based on Heckman 1976**) to address self-selection into relationships and offending.

And if it makes it into your Intro, it may also be worthy of discussing at some length in the Literature Review/Theory section.

A *method* source may also supply definitions, categories, or labels that you will use for your own work:

> Recent work on demeanor and the police use of force **(Engel, Sobal, and Worden 2000; Garner, Maxwell, and Heraux 2002)** has distinguished two important dimensions of disrespectful behavior: disrespectful demeanor toward an officer and the use of physical force against an officer.

Citations to databases are also a type of *method* sources:

> We test our hypotheses using two waves of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health **(Add Health, 2001).**

Four Ways to Use Sources in Sociology Writing: A Summary

Background: To reference information as facts. "You don't have to take my word for it; you can look it up here."

Argument: To present evidence supporting (or challenging) your claim. "Should we believe

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X? Let's consider this . . ." Or to present someone else's position or claim and respond to it: "So-and-so says . . . "

Theory: To provide a sociological framework or lens for your ideas, interpretations, or research

Method: To borrow a procedure or approach. "I didn't invent this way of doing X. You can read about it here."

Quoting, Paraphrasing, and Summarizing

Once you have decided to use a source for a particular purpose, you need to decide *how* to use it. Your three main choices are these:

- *Quoting*: repeating the sources words exactly (or with slight, clearly noted edits)
- *Paraphrasing*: restating the ideas or information using about the same amount of space but reworded to make it fit your own purpose and context
- *Summarizing*: describing or explaining something in far fewer words than the original (this may also include explaining the overall point of a chart or table in words)

Whichever you choose, it's important to keep your own voice out front. In other words, readers should feel that they are hearing *your* perspective even when you are discussing the work of other writers. Here are some guidelines on how to deploy your sources effectively.

Quote Only When the Exact Words Matter

When readers encounter a quotation in your paper, they assume there is something important about the exact words

used in the source that you want them to notice. Readers will pay special attention to those quoted words—in order to see what you think is so important. So if the exact words of your source aren't important, putting them in quotes is a misleading signal; in that case, you should paraphrase or summarize instead.

When Quoting, Use the Fewest Words Possible

We understand why you might be tempted to use the longest possible excerpt. (We too can recall high school assignments for which we inflated our two pages of ideas to fill the required ten-page minimum.) But when you use more of someone else's words than you need to make your point, it makes it harder for readers to see in those words what you want them to see. If a quotation includes more than is needed, readers—including your professor—are well aware that you are wasting space (and their time). When we asked our colleagues for their pet peeves regarding student writing, overlong quotes came up often.

Quote Only the Words Needed to Make Your Point

Instead of this . . .

In "Bourgeois and Proletarians," the first section of the Manifesto, Marx argues that the history of society is the history of unceasing class struggles: "**Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in**

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a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes."

. . . write this:

In the first section of the Manifesto, "Bourgeois and Proletarians," Marx argues that the history of society is the history of unceasing class struggles: **"Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed."**

Keep Your Voice Out in Front: It's Your Paper

Your readers need to feel that everything in the paper is being shaped by your brain, even when you're discussing what other people wrote or said.

Here is one dependable technique for making your paper read like *your* paper: Start every section and most paragraphs with an introduction in which you share your own points, ideas, or perspectives—before discussing what others have said or thought. For a paragraph, this introduction will usually require a sentence at least. For the start of a section, you might need a paragraph. (Note: these are minimums. If you start every paragraph with only a sentence of your own and then fill the rest of the paragraph with source material, you're still patchwriting! See Chapter 8, pp. ____.) If you tend to make your points at the ends of paragraphs, try shifting them to the beginning.

Here is another way to keep your voice out front: When you discuss a source at some length, refer to the author (or organization) by name to make them characters in your paper. It might seem odd that you can make your work more your own by naming other people, but it's true. When you write,

"According to Durkheim . . . " we hear you speaking; but if you just summarize Durkheim without explicitly attributing his ideas to him—your voice gets muddled with his. Here are guidelines for when to invoke an author directly in your prose:

- If you are quoting, *always* invoke the author(s) by name in addition to the citation. If the exact words are important, who said them must also be important.
- If you are summarizing or paraphrasing ideas, concepts, arguments, or reasons that you can attribute to specific authors or organizations, bring them into your discussion.
- If you use a reference as a source for statistics, dates, definitions, or other information that you expect readers to accept without question as plain facts, the citation alone is sufficient. Here's another way to look at it: If you could just as well have found the same information in other sources, the author probably isn't important enough to mention directly.

Altering a Quotation

There are times when the exact words of a source are important enough to quote, but you need to change them just a bit. Say the sentence you want to quote is in the middle of a paragraph, and it uses a pronoun to refer to someone named at the start of the paragraph. If you leave it as it is, your readers won't understand it because they don't know what the pronoun refers to. You could quote everything from the start of the paragraph to the sentence you want, but, as we explain above, all of those extra words make it harder for your readers to get the point of the quotation. Your best options is to change the quotation by replacing the pronoun with its antecedent—using square brackets to show where you altered the quotation. Square brackets are a signal to your readers telling them, "I've done some editing to this quotation and I want you to know exactly what I've changed."

In the following example, the quoted material originally began a sentence and so the first letter was capitalized. But since the author wanted to imbed the material into the middle of her own sentence, she changed the first letter to lowercase, identifying the alteration with brackets around the words you insert:

> One is not surprised to find leading eugenicists proselytizing, as when Karl Pearson suggested that "[**s**]**ocialists** have to inculcate that spirit which would give offenders against the State short shift and the nearest lamp-post."

If additional words are needed to make a quoted passage understandable because it has been removed from its context, use square brackets:

> "Most Jews only secured a stable position in the low and middling ranks of the bourgeoisie at the end of the [**nineteenth**] century" (Hyman 1998:62), . . .
>
> Sutherland argued that "the fallacy of the proposed method [**regarding the minimum wage**] of attaining it is that it assumes that every employer is bound in all events to furnish it."

You can also use square brackets to eliminate unnecessary words. In the following example, the author has omitted many words in the middle of the passage that weren't relevant to her point. When she picks up again after the ellipsis, only a pronoun (they) is need to identify the subject from the first part of the quotation:

> "Expert policy counsel, in fact, turned out to be the ground on which laissez-faire's professional critics regrouped and refashioned a position of influence . . . [**they**] established

new forms of authority by colonizing the social space between university professorships and expert government service."

Summarizing Versus Paraphrasing

If you don't have a good reason to quote a source, your choices are summarizing or paraphrasing. When should you paraphrase? When you want to capture the essential details of a sentence or longer passage, but either the exacting wording isn't important or the language used in the source isn't a good fit for your context. For example, say you want to include a description of how a study was conducted, but the authors of the study used highly technical language that your readers probably won't understand. Think of paraphrasing as a type of translation: The authors of the source were writing for their context, which is not the same as yours. You want to rewrite the passage in a way that is faithful to the original but in words that make sense for the writing you are doing.

When should you summarize? When you want to tell your readers about something you read in a source, but in less detail than the original. You might reduce a full paragraph to a sentence or two, or perhaps capture the gist of an entire section or chapter in a few sentences. You might even have occasion to explain the main point of an entire book in a paragraph. Because you are reducing the amount of prose, you want to focus on what's important *for your purpose*.

Dealing With Jargon in Summary Writing

Students often pay insufficient attention to the words they choose when writing summaries. Once you have a draft of your summary, step back and look for specialized

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vocabulary—words, phrases, abbreviations, or acronyms that someone without specialized knowledge wouldn't likely understand. For each item you identify, ask yourself these questions: Is this important for my paper? Do I use it more than once or twice? Unless you can clearly answer "yes" to both questions, it's not reasonable to make your reader learn them. Replace those words with language your readers will understand.

This doesn't mean that you should always avoid using technical language. It's often reasonable—especially if avoiding such terms makes your writing long-winded and repetitive. But remember that you may need to teach or remind *your* readers what these words mean—even if that wasn't true for readers of the source text. If that's the case, take the time to do it right: Define those terms, spell out the acronyms, and so on. If you think you'll need more than a few sentences or it seems to interrupt the flow of your writing, do it in a footnote.

Students are often given assignments to summarize a text without any *context*. This is a nonsensical assignment. There is no such thing as a well-written summary *in general*. The amount of detail you need to include and the words you should use are entirely dependent on who you are writing for and why. If you are writing for specialists in a particular subfield of sociology, you could effectively summarize a research report in a few sentences. You'd need to use more space and less technical language to communicate effectively with sociologists who work outside of that area, and considerably more words and less jargon if your readers are not trained in sociology at all.

So if you are asked to write a summary, ask for the context: Who is the summary for? Why would they be reading it? Once you have a sense of your rhetorical context, use it to guide your decisions. Ask yourself, "What do *my* readers need to know? Which details might have been important for readers of the source text but are not relevant for my readers?"

Choosing Sources

Although you will use many different types of sources in writing sociology papers, we think the most important distinction is between these three categories:

1. *Theoretical work*: These are writings that focus on the how and why of sociology. They provide the ideas that guide how we understand the field, the questions we ask, and how we interpret data we collect.
2. *Research reports:* These are the papers (and sometimes books) written by researchers presenting new research—what they did, how they did it, and what they think it means. Research reports are the source of our knowledge regarding how people actually interact.
3. Everything else

We are going to skip over the first category—because (1) this is a short book and (2) for almost everything you will write in sociology courses, your professors will assign or guide you to the relevant theoretical material. If you need help choosing theoretical sources, ask your instructor.

Peer-Reviewed Studies: The Gold Standard

For research literature, there is one quality your professors will likely consider more important than anything else: whether or not it's *peer reviewed*. Like all sciences, sociology

has an established quality-control mechanism for published research. Despite the high quality of much sociological research, there's some dubious and substandard stuff, too—papers that "talk" like research but are really just biased advocacy pieces with cherry-picked data. Sorting out the quality and value of new research is the function of the peer review system.

Peer review functions something like movie reviews you've probably read or watched. Viewers won't all agree on whether a particular movie is great, but if reviewers for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Los Angeles Times* all give a movie the "thumbs up," it's very unlikely to be a bad film. For research journals, editors send articles to (typically) three scholars who are specialists in the subfield of the submitted article. Each of them independently reviews the article and sends comments privately back to the editor. Based on these reviews, the editor decides whether to (1) accept the article as is, (2) ask the authors to "revise and resubmit," or (3) reject the paper. A paper will be rejected if it doesn't meet the quality standards of the journal, but also if the editor doesn't believe that the topic or approach is a good fit with the journal's mission. Many papers now go through multiple rounds of revision before getting accepted. (Yes, your professors usually have to revise their writing, too!) Peer review isn't perfect; reviewers and editors are human and thus prone to errors and biases like the rest of us. But it's the best filter we've got.

The number of peer-reviewed journals that publish sociologically relevant research is quite large, and there's a definite pecking order among them. Although there is no single accepted measure for determining which journals are "best," every professional sociologist would recognize a few as decidedly top tier: *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *Annual Review of Sociology*. Publishing in these journals gives authors the greatest prestige and visibility, and reviewers

for articles are chosen from among the top experts. If a well-conducted database search turns up way too many relevant hits, one way to select among them is by journal reputation. When in doubt, *ask your librarian*; it will be his favorite question of the day. Of course, you can ask your professors, too. And if you are inquiring as to whether a particular source is acceptable, you can also ask for suggestions for better sources. Professors are usually happy to help students who have done some serious work on their own first.

Top Journals in Sociology

There are more highly respected journals in the field than we have space to mention, but here are some of them:

American Journal of Sociology
American Sociological Review
Annual Review of Sociology
Rationality and Society
Sociological Methodology
Sociological Methods & Research, Population and Development Review
Sociology of Education
Social Forces
Social Networks
Journal of Marriage and the Family
Social Problems
Sociological Theory
Law & Society Review
Theory and Society
Gender & Society
Social Psychology Quarterly
Social Science Research
Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion

Other Types of Sources

Many of your sociology writing tasks will require the use of scholarly literature, the kind of sources we discussed earlier. But for most projects, you will need to use other kinds of sources as well. The types of sources you need will depend on the kind of writing you are doing—but just because a source is the right *type* doesn't automatically mean it's a good choice. This is true for any writing you do, but it's especially important in sociology. The topics sociologists study are often related to hot-button issues on which people have strong opinions and may also have major policy implications—things like racial and gender equality, adolescent behavior, education, public safety, and so on. Strong opinions and policy ramification can lead to biased presentation of facts, data, and research. Another complexity is that key facts central to some sociology topics can change markedly in only a few years. (Just one year before we began this book, marijuana was not legal for recreational use anywhere in the United States.) This means that we have to be especially careful in choosing our sources. A savvy consideration of sources will consider three factors: *timeliness*, *authoritativeness*, and *bias*.

Timeliness: Does It Pass the Sniff Test?

A fresh piece of salmon will start to smell unpleasant after just a few days. When does a source begin to stink? That depends on the nature of the material *and* how you plan to use it. If you're discussing sociological theory, Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society* could be quite relevant, even though it was published in 1893. But some sources become outdated for some purposes within a few years or even sooner. Consider this citation from a sociology paper on online dating:

> The Match.com website has more than twelve million members (Gibbs 2006).

Note that this paper cites the Gibbs source as *current* information: "Match.com has . . . " Is it likely that the membership of a match-making website could change dramatically in just a few years? Of course. So while this citation would have been just fine for a paper written in 2006 or 2007, it reeks now. On the other hand, if you are investigating how online dating has *changed over time*, Gibbs might always be a good reference for a 2006 benchmark.

So you see, you can't judge the freshness of a source without considering *how* you use it. There's no simple answer to the question, "How old is too old?" You have to use your brain and your nose. Good theory is like good red wine; it lasts a very long time. A statistic describing how things *are* is more like fresh fish. Research findings are somewhere in-between (perhaps an onion?), since their current value depends a lot on how much related research has been done since they were published. If you cite a research report as gospel that's since been refuted by many studies, it will be clear that you haven't done your homework. On the other hand, citing an older but groundbreaking study that started the line of work you are discussing is useful for showing your reader the foundation for your thinking.

Authoritativeness: Do They Have the Credentials?

Imagine you are 5 years old, and Jimmy, the 7-year-old kid from across the street, tells you it's okay to let his dog lick your mouth. His dog's mouth, he tells you, is cleaner than your own. Does the 5-year-old you pause to reflect on the source of this information? ("Let's see . . . What kind of background would someone need to know such facts? A veterinary degree? Or a master's degree in public health?") Not likely. Five-year-old you is equally unlikely to judge Jimmy's veracity on the dog-licking statement based on what he told you in the past ("If you make a funny face and keep it that way for more than 5 minutes, it will stay that way forever"). It's doubtful you'd even have

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paused to consider what that tongue was licking just before it got to your mouth.

When we say that a source should be *authoritative*, we mean that those providing the material are authorities on the specific subject matter at hand. Do you go to Jimmy to find out where you can find a red crayon in his house? Sure. To get facts about canine–human pathogen transfers? No way. You need to be similarly judicious in choosing whose information or opinion you want in your papers.

For peer-reviewed journal articles, authoritativeness isn't really an issue. You can assume that the journal editor has taken care of that. But for other types of sources, you need to ask, "Is this a good source for that information?" If it's facts you're after, you'd do better to start with this question: "Given what I want to know, who is most likely to have that expertise?" Then use your answer (or your librarian's answer) to locate an authoritative source.

Choosing Sources

- *Is it timely?* Give it the sniff test. Decide whether sources are sufficiently up to date.

- *Is it authoritative?* Check its credentials. Use sources you and your reader will trust.
- *Is it biased?* Interrogate it. Know who is behind your sources and be skeptical about their motivations.

When it comes to judging whether a source is suitably authoritative, you're not the only one whose opinion matters. You should expect your readers to be skeptical, too. Your Aunt Mimi may actually know quite a bit about what makes women more likely to return to prison once they are out on parole, but your readers will have more faith in your writing if you cite the US Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics. Use sources that you *and* your readers will accept.

Here are a few tips for judging authoritativeness. In the age of Google, it's usually easy to figure these things out with a little poking around.

- Who wrote it and what are their credentials? What do you know about the author or publisher? If it's a webpage, be especially careful, since anybody can build a website and make it look professional.
- Government agencies may not be inherently reliable sources for all information, but they're a safer bet than randomly chosen sites. If you're looking for something that a government agency might publish, limit your search to .gov sites. (On Google, just add site:.gov to your search.)
- Don't confuse databases with publishers. The fact that you find an article via EBSCO or Elsevier doesn't tell you anything about how authoritative specific sources are for your purpose.

Bias: Are There Conflicts of Interest?

In a class one of us taught some years ago, students were researching whether modern electric toothbrushes were more effective than the old-fashioned, hand-powered kind. There were about a dozen peer-reviewed articles on the topic, and *every* one included either an author who worked for a toothbrush manufacturer or had funding from such a company. This doesn't mean such studies are worthless; but it would be easy to miss this important information if you weren't looking for it. And it matters: There are many ways to measure toothbrush "effectiveness," and some are more likely to produce favorable outcomes than others. The same is true for determining whether violent crime is increasing, if dispensing clean needles increases drug use, or whether abstinence-only education reduces teen pregnancy.

Depending on what you're studying, there may or may not be such obvious conflicts of interest at work. But it's important to understand who might have a stake in the various sources of information you are using. Let's say you are studying whether police tend to use excessive force in certain situations. Whose data should you rely on? The police? The libertarian think tank CATO? An activist group? There is no such thing as a completely unbiased source, but some are clearly more biased than others. Although we can't always know why a source presents data one way rather than another, a sophisticated person will do some digging if she doesn't have good reason to trust a particular source. (Librarians are good at this, too.)

If you find that various sources provide contradictory information, don't despair. Instead, recognize that you have uncovered something important about the way that information is disseminated. That is in itself worth explaining to your readers.

A Note About Wikipedia

Wikipedia is certainly great for source snooping, but many professors don't consider it to be an appropriate source for academic papers (even though studies have shown Wikipedia to be equal in quality to the standard encyclopedias).

Snooping Sources With Wikipedia

1. Find the name of the publisher or hosting organization. Don't cite any source—whether periodical, book, or website—that doesn't name the organization or publisher.
2. Check the name of the organization or publisher in Wikipedia. Nothing there? Be very skeptical.
3. Skim the Wikipedia entry to get a feel for whether the source can be considered reasonably authoritative and to assess biases.
4. If the source passes the authoritativeness test but seems likely to have a strong bias on the matter at hand, ask a librarian to help you find other sources to consider alongside this one. At a minimum, comment on the likely bias when you discuss the material from source in your paper.

Let's say you want to know whether home-schooled children have more or less success in college compared to other kids. A quick look on the Web turns up many hits, including information from these three organizations:

1. National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI)
2. *Journal of College Admission*
3. The Cato Institute

Let's do the Wikipedia snoop. The first is quick: no entry for NHERI, so that one doesn't pass our test. What about the *Journal of College Admission*? The website for the journal gives its parenting organization as the National Association for College Admission Counseling—which does have a Wikipedia entry; we learn this is "an organization of more than 13,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students transitioning from secondary to post-secondary education. It includes professional school counselors, college access counselors, admission and financial aid officers, and others." Seems like a good choice considering both authoritativeness and bias. How about the Cato Institute? There is a Wiki entry for this one, too, which describes Cato as "an American libertarian think tank headquartered in Washington, D.C." whose mission is "to originate, disseminate, and increase understanding of public policies based on the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace." A think tank report lists it among the nation's top think tanks (although it isn't clear what this measures). Cato is clearly a known entity, but given its that its mission is based on "limited government," it's safe to assume a strong bias in favor of home schooling.

Wikipedia isn't the only option for checking on sources. Your sociology professors will know about the reputation of most journals in the field. And don't forget librarians. Not only do they know the reputations of lots of sources, they can show you reference guides that discuss hundreds if not thousands of sources. Ask them about *Magazines for Libraries*—a wonderful but underused resource.

Interrogating Sources: An Example Reference List

Here is a reference list from a sociology paper on gender inequality. If this were our student's work, how would we judge the choices this student made? Let's consider each source:

1. The Gender Inequality Index (2010). Retrieved November 16, 2010, from http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/gii/
2. Gender and society (2007). Retrieved November 16, 2010, from http://www.trinity.edu/~mkearl/gender.html
3. 10 extreme examples of gender inequality (2009). Retrieved November 16, 2010, from http://listverse.com/2008/11/20/10-extreme-examples-of-gender-inequality/
4. The natural basis for gender inequality (2008). Retrieved November 16, 2010, from http://scienceblogs.com/gregladen/2008/12/the_natural_basis_for_gender_i.php
5. Gender inequality: women under stress (2009). Retrieved November 16, 2010, from http://health.howstuffworks.com/wellness/stress-management/women-under-stress.htm
6. Gender inequality begins at 16 (2006). Retrieved November 16, 2010, from http://www.hrmguide.co.uk/diversity/occupational-segregation.htm

Source #1 is a United Nations website for Human Development Reports. This seems like a good source for such information, doesn't it? In fact, the citation doesn't do it justice. It *should* have included not just the title of the page but also the organization that hosts the site. If "United Nations" had been there in the reference list, we would likely have been satisfied with just a quick glance at the citation because we're familiar with that organization. Thumbs up for the source. Thumbs down for the citation.

How about source #2? A quick look at the page shows it's actually a *student* project from Trinity University in San Antonio Texas. We don't know anything about the student who wrote it, but if she were already an authority on gender and society she probably wouldn't have done this project for a course assignment. Thumbs down!

Reference #3 is a rather odd site—just random lists of things. In addition to the list of gender inequality examples cited, we find "Top 10 Evil Serial Killers" and "10 Bizarre Discoveries From the World of Batman." Not exactly scholarly stuff. And can we even trust that the people making these lists are experts in those topics? A little bit of digging around the site takes us beyond skeptical to outright cynical:

> Listverse was built on the efforts of readers just like you. Readers who didn't have any experience as writers but decided to put a list together and send it in. So here is the deal: we will pay you $100 for your efforts. You don't need to be an expert—you just need to have great English, a sense of humor, and a love for things unusual or interesting.

Four thumbs down. (And besides, their standards for "great English" don't even include proper punctuation.)

Source #4 is a little trickier. It's a "science blog," but the blog is not hosted by an organization we're familiar with. Not compelling. Source #5 is on the "How Stuff Works" website and it's impossible to tell who writes these articles. This might be a fine source for answers to questions like "Are Kevlar mountain bike tires worth the cost?" or to figure out "How to Unclog a Toilet Without a Plunger." But as a source for a scholarly paper? Nope.

Finally, #6: This one came close to being a winner. The "About" page of the website gives us little useful information—only that "HRM Guide is an independent online publisher of articles and information about Human Resource Management and related subjects." We also learn that advertising "is accepted on (almost) all HRM Guide website pages." Not much to go on there. However, at the top of the cited page we find this:

> A report by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) shows that gender inequality in education and work begins at sixteen. Girls and boys study most subjects in roughly equal numbers for GCSE. Girls do very well but once their examinations are over the genders rapidly move towards traditionally "male" or "female" subjects.

Now, the EOC *does* show up on Wikipedia, from which we learn it was "an independent non-departmental public body in the United Kingdom, which tackled sex discrimination and promoted gender equality." Too bad the paper didn't cite the EOC report instead. That *would* have been an excellent choice.