

Sources for Higher Education

Welcome to podcast number five. This week, we're going to explore some of the resources you may be expected to use as you start your assignments. During the first year, particularly in the first few weeks, you're probably going to be told what to read or be directed to book chapters or articles in your online reading lists. However, at some stage, you'll be asked to find your own source of information. And it's useful to be reminded that good information can be found in more than just textbooks. So first of all, let's meet Laura who's one of the Academic Liaison Librarians.

So Laura, what will students be using that they may not have come across before?

It might seem obvious, you're going to be using books, but I think that you might be using them in a different way. So for example, you're probably never going to read the whole book, you're probably going to look at the table of contents, or perhaps the index in the back and just find the thing that answers the question and gives you a bit of an insight into what you're trying to research.

And I think it's easier actually with an ebook because you can search by keyword. So the library has loads of ebooks. So that's a really good way to just kind of dip into a book and read a little bit, and then then you can reference it in your sources. One of the things about books is that they do take quite a long time to publish, around about two years. So some of the things in them might already be out of date. So if you've got a topic that's changing really quickly, like business trends or something like that, then you might need to use different sources. And we'll talk about that in a minute.

Another thing that I think sometimes students are new to when they come to university is a book with chapters written by different people in it. And it might be called a reader, it might be kind of like all the core essays and critical thinking about a particular topic, or might just be like an edited book about that topic with lots of different authors opinions, and I think those are really good sources. Because you can get lots of opinions in the same book. And also it makes your reference list look really good because you've got lots of different references, even though you've only had to get one book out.

Okay, so how about using journals? I think the name can be a little bit confusing to start off with...

Yeah, it makes you think about diaries and writing your journal doesn't it? Journals might be new to people. I mean, essentially, I think most people know what a magazine is. Sometimes we talk about journals. And they are in fact magazines. And sometimes we're talking about an academic journal, which has been written by academics about research that they've done. And it's really aimed other academics. So the writing is quite different to how you would read it in a magazine, which has been written by a journalist. We might also, when we're thinking about journals, it might be a sort of professional or trade magazine. It could be something like Harvard Business Review, for example, which has been written by journalists. But it is, you know, really good top quality information about that particular area of work with the journals. And I think most you're going to find them online.

When you read those journal articles, each one will have an abstract at the beginning, which just summarizes what's in the journal.

My really top tip is to read the abstracts, if you don't understand what the abstract's saying, then you know, don't bother reading the whole article, because you haven't got to that point yet in your studies where you can understand that vocabulary. You will get to that point. But you know, don't panic if you don't understand the abstract, move on to another journal article where you can understand what's going on in it. Most journals that we talk about, and that your lecturer is expecting you to reference will be peer reviewed. And that means that other academics have read that work. And they've

evaluated it, they've checked that it's relevant that all the things they're saying are true, it means it's really top quality work. So you do have to look for peer reviewed journal articles as well.

How do students go about finding those peer reviewed academic journals? Are they easy to find?

Well, yeah, like I said, mostly when you're searching online, you can use the library search, that's a really good starting place to search. Most of the results that come up will be journals articles anyway, you can filter by journal articles or peer reviewed. We do have some print journals in the library but it's time consuming, looking through print journals. And also there's just masses more online. So that's, that's probably your best route.

I've also noticed that you've got lots of glossy magazines in the library such as Vogue or Empire, is it okay to use those for research?

I think it is, it all depends on what you want to get out of it really, what you want. And what your assignment's about. It's really good, I think to balance what you've got in your assignment to use academic sources, as well as those sort of magazine sources. But I think the good thing about these magazines is that, especially the images that are in there, and some of the original material is really good if you're doing an image based course. So if you're doing fashion or photography or something, then obviously you're going to be wanting to look at those magazines.

So on some briefs students will be asked to look at a mixture of primary and secondary sources. So could you have a go at explaining a bit more about what primary and secondary sources are?

Yeah, this can be a tricky question. And also, I think it sometimes means different things for different subject areas as well say, for example, my subject - I'm the subject librarian for photography. Photography students are often asked to write a critical review around a photograph or particular photographer, and say that photograph is the primary source, it's the original, you know, piece of artwork. And then when they're writing about that photograph, they then refer to other authors who've written about that photographer, or who've written about that kind of genre.

And their work will be the secondary source, because they're writing about the original source. So you need to do both of those things. I mean, sometimes you don't have to do any primary stuff. Sometimes it's just what other people think about this, what do I think about it, but sometimes you will need to use those primary sources as well. So you can see how that might transfer. It might be an artwork, it might be a fashion design, a photograph, if you're doing something social sciences, then it might be a survey, and my understanding is if you're doing English, then it could be a novel. Because that is the original artwork.

So I'm trying to think about other sources? How about newspapers, news reports? Have they got a role in HE writing?

I think so, yeah. I mean, I think that they can be really good to like current information for, particularly for getting a little bit of data and a bit of information. But I think what we need to be aware of is that they are aimed at the general public. So the way they're written is quite different. And they might not be researched as well as an academic journal article. If there's arguments in it, or if there's sort of data and it's all kind of facts, you will want to just back those up with a few different other sources so that you can be sure, because often, I think most people will be aware that newspaper articles, or newspapers tend to have a political bias. So you might need to be aware of that as well.

So a little bit of caution there. And how about TV programs? Will they be a good source?

Yeah, while TV programs like newspapers, are kind of made for the general public, they can be a good source, especially TV documentaries. One of the advisors in the inclusive team said to me that it's a really good place to prime your brain. So if you find reading challenging, then you know, TV documentary can be a really great place to start to understand what are the key concepts in this thing I'm looking at, what's the key vocabulary, and get that all into your brain. And then when you come to do the reading that you've been asked to do for your course, you're going to find that easier, because those things are already there. If you do find, you know, learning through sort of visual medium, and TV, then I think it's a really good place to start

It can be really accessible. Okay, so of course, there are lots of other sources as well, things like statistics and maps, but I think that will probably be enough for now, about sources.

But to sum up, I think it sounds to me as if to really get to grips with a topic, relying on one source won't be enough. Neither is it a good idea to only look for information that backs up your viewpoint. Your work will be more credible if you include opposing arguments and to do that you need to be aware of a wide range of opinions and to use a wide range of resources.

When you are using all these sources. You are going to need to take notes and to have an effective way of taking notes and recording what you've read. So there's lots of information on that on the Study Hub as well about effective reading strategies, and for reading quickly as well.

Yeah, lots of really, really good top tips on that, definitely go to the study hub.

The next podcast is going to be called Put Your Critical Hat On, and it will look at how you decide what to use in your assignments.