Guidelines for Proper Sources

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Evaluating Sources

Authority – Who produced it? What expertise, experience, or knowledge do they bring?

Evidence – What evidence or knowledge supports the claims?

Methods – How was the knowledge produced?

Relevance – How directly does it relate to your research question?

Currency – Is it sufficiently current for the topic?

Purpose – Why was it produced, and for what audience?

Perspective – What perspectives or assumptions shape the source?

Limitations – What can the source tell you, and what can it not tell you?

Representation – Whose knowledge, experiences, or perspectives are included or missing?

Contribution – What does this source add to your understanding of the topic?

Quality of Sources

Strongest synthesis of research:

- Systematic reviews
- Meta-analyses

Other scholarly reviews:

- Narrative or literature review articles

Primary academic research:

- Peer-reviewed quantitative studies
- Peer-reviewed qualitative studies
- Mixed-methods studies
- Academic books and book chapters

Although some forms of evidence generally carry more scholarly weight than others, use the strongest and most appropriate evidence for the claim you are making.

Other important sources of evidence and knowledge:

- Government research, reports, and statistics
- Indigenous scholarship and publications
- Community-based and participatory research
- Reports from reputable organizations and institutions
- Policy documents
- Theses and dissertations

Useful only for particular purposes, but evaluate very carefully (usually considered weak sources):

- News articles
- General websites
- Advocacy publications
- Blogs and opinion pieces
- Commercial publications
- Social media

The Best Source Depends on the Question

A meta-analysis may provide strong evidence about whether an effect is consistent across many studies

A qualitative study may be better for understanding experiences, meanings, relationships, or decision-making

An Indigenous publication or knowledge source may be essential for understanding Indigenous knowledge, relationships to land, governance, or community priorities

A community organization may be the most appropriate source for understanding its own practices, experiences, and priorities

A government dataset may be the strongest source for official statistics

The strongest source is not always the same type of source. It depends on what you are trying to understand.