Sources

Research involves finding sources, reading them, understanding them, and making notes. This section will cover these skills.

Finding Quality Sources

Not all types of source can be used as academic sources. This is because some sources of information are unreliable. The general rule is that a source must be “peer-reviewed.” Peer review is a process by which someone’s work is checked by other academics before it is published. This is usually done so that those checking the work do not know who the author is, and the author never knows who checked it. This process is known as “blind peer review.” A work will only be published once the reviewers have certified it is up to the standards of the discipline.

All academic journals are blind peer-reviewed, so any paper published in an academic journal will be acceptable as a source in your assignment. There are a few fake journals, but they will not be accessible via the library system.

Newspapers, magazines, and most websites are not acceptable. A few websites, such as the Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, are run by universities and are peer-reviewed. These are acceptable. Wikipedia is not peer-reviewed and anyone can write any rubbish they like in it, so never—ever—cite Wikipedia.

Newspapers, magazines and sites like YouTube are acceptable as evidence of social activity, but the contents of their news stories cannot be cited as reliable facts.

Books are generally considered acceptable sources.

Searching

The best search engine for source material is the library search (https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/library). Use the ADVANCED search form wherever possible. The basic search form searches everything the system knows—the title, the author’s names, and often the abstract, of one of the millions of documents it has access to. This is almost always too much. ADVANCED search form allows you be more focused.

The key to successful searching is limiting your results.

When you first search, you may get thousands of results. You need to use those results to help you refine the search further, then repeat this process until you get a manageable amount. A common trick is to run an initial search in the basic search bar on the library’s front page, then refine the results in advanced mode.

Searching for exact phrases: Search engines look for any item which matches any of the terms in the search. So a search for australian ocean traffic could yield results on traffic in London, the Atlantic ocean, and Australian history. Search engines can be forced to use exact phrases by putting them in quotes, such as “australian ocean traffic”

Removing results: Sometimes the results include words you don’t want. You can force the search engine to ignore results containing a word by putting a minus sign in front, eg: social media -facebook will find results on social media but filter out anything about Facebook.

Reducing the scope: Imagine I want to write about political relations between Britain and France. A basic search for “britain france” yields nearly two million results. However, since we can only use peer-reviewed sources, selecting “scholarly and peer-reviewed” from the REFINE option, drops it to 240,000 results. Refining this to journal articles whose text is online and accessible removes another 40,000 items. The next step is to refine the discipline. By selecting “international relations” the results are now down to 23,000. Even 23,000 is too many to look at, so we now start reducing the time period of publication until the number becomes manageable. Restricting the search to only papers published in the last year brings the results down to 230 items.

Searching is a skill which the library staff can help with. In addition to classes, there are subject specialist librarians who can help you make very targeted searches and who understand the best sources.

Footnote mining

“Footnote mining” is a common research technique. You first find a citation for a point relevant to your research in a paper or book. You then find and read the document it cited. It will contain citations for points
which support its own arguments. You find and read the documents cited for the points you wish to use from this second document. You can then track down documents of interest from this third set of cited documents.

Footnote mining means you can start with a single source, then find the rest of your research material by following its citations, and the citations of those citations, etc. It is efficient because it ensures everything you read is relevant to your previous research efforts.