

Student Feature - Advice on Using Sources

Written by Stephen McGlinchey

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/12/21/student-feature-advice-on-using-sources/>

STEPHEN MCGLINCHEY, DEC 21 2016

This is an adapted excerpt from *International Relations*. Download the book for free from E-International Relations.

Referencing sources is very important in academia. It is the way scholars and students attribute the work of others, whether they use their exact words or not. For that reason it is usual to see numerous references in the expert literature you read during your studies. It is an important element of scholarly writing, and one that you should master for your own studies.

When authors need to point you to specialist literature, for example to invite you to read a little deeper or to reference information, they usually do so by inserting in-text citations that look like this: (Vale 2016b). These point you to a corresponding entry in the references section towards the end where you can find the full reference and follow it up if you want to. Typically, these are books, journal articles or websites. In-text citations always include the author's surname and the year of publication. As the reference list is organised alphabetically by surname, you can quickly locate the full reference. Sometimes you will also find page numbers inside the brackets. For example, (Vale 2016b, 11–13). Page numbers are added when referring to specific arguments, or a quotation, from a source. This referencing system is known as the 'Author-Date' or 'Harvard' system. It is the most common, but not the only, referencing system used in International Relations. You may also find references cited with footnotes or endnotes, which look slightly different but work in much the same way. Before you prepare an assignment, check your instructor's guidance so you can be sure to be using the correct system.

For full guides to both systems, see here. You can see the page has tabs for both systems with plenty of examples.

When the time comes for you to make your own arguments and write your own assignments, think of using sources as if you were a lawyer preparing a court case. Your task there would be to convince a jury that your argument is defensible, beyond reasonable doubt. You would have to present clear, well-organised evidence based on facts and expertise. If you presented evidence that was just someone's uninformed opinion, the jury would not find it convincing and you would lose the case. Similarly, in academic writing you have to make sure that the sources you use are reputable. You can usually find this out by looking up the author and the publisher. If the author is not an expert (academic, practitioner, etc.) and/or the publisher is unknown/obscure, then the source is likely unreliable. It may have interesting information, but it is not reputable by scholarly standards.

It should be safe to assume that you know what a book is and that you understand what the internet is. However, one type of source that you will find cited in the academic literature and may not have encountered before is the journal article. Journal articles are typically only accessible from your university library as they are expensive and require a subscription. They are papers prepared by academics, for academics. As such, they represent the latest thinking and may contain cutting-edge insights. But, they are often complex and dense due to their audience being fellow experts, and this makes them hard for a beginner to read. In addition, journal articles are peer reviewed. This means they have gone through a process of assessment by other experts before being published. During that process many changes and improvements may be made – and articles often fail to make it through peer review and are rejected. So, journal articles are something of a gold standard in scholarly writing.

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Most journal articles are now available on the internet, which leads to confusion as students can find it difficult to distinguish a journal article from an online magazine or newspaper article. Works of journalism or opinion are not peer reviewed and conform to different standards. If you follow the tip above and 'search' the publisher and author, you should be able to discern which is which. Another helpful tip is length. A journal article will typically be 10–20 pages long (7,000–11,000 words); articles of journalism or commentary will usually be shorter.

Students tend to overly-trust books, as they are historically seen as authoritative. However, do beware when using books. Always check the publication date first. Depending on your subject an older book might still be useful (a specific historical event, or a biography for example). However on subjects that are fast moving, such as European Politics, US Politics or just about anything contemporary, then a book even a couple of years old is going to have to be used with caution. You will need to cross check things you cite / rely on are still accurate or have changed. You can also check to see whether the book has got a newer edition. The second (and third) thing you should check before relying on a book are the author and publisher. In the modern world self publishing / vanity publishing has become so cheap and easy that sometimes the content in books (while looking reputable) can be no more rigorous than you would find on a blog. And, sometimes the content can be highly dubious.

A final note on the subject of sources: the internet is something of a Wild West. There is great information there, but also a lot of rubbish. It can often be hard to tell them apart. But, again, if you follow the golden rule of looking up the author and looking up the publisher (using the internet), you can usually find your way. However, even some of the world's biggest websites can be unreliable. Wikipedia, for example, is a great resource, but it often has incorrect information because it is authored, and usually edited, by ordinary people who are typically enthusiasts rather than experts. In addition, its pages are always changing (because of user edits), making it hard to rely on as a source. So the rule of thumb with the internet is to try to corroborate anything you find on at least two good websites/from at least two reputable authors. Then you can use the internet with confidence and enjoy its benefits while avoiding its pitfalls – such as falling prey to fake news. When preparing assignments, however, you should only use the internet to supplement the more robust information you will find in academic journals and books.

About the author:

Dr Stephen McGlinchey is the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of E-International Relations and Senior Lecturer of International Relations at UWE Bristol. His publications include *Foundations of International Relations* (Bloomsbury 2022), *International Relations* (2017), *International Relations Theory* (2017) and *US Arms Policies Towards the Shah's Iran* (Routledge 2021, 2014). You can find him on twitter @mcglincheyst or LinkedIn.