How to Use a Source: The BEAM Method

If you are exploring a research question, then you will need a variety of sources representing many different types and viewpoints. It is important to understand the differences between the types of sources, when to use them, and most importantly, how to use them. Any type of source might be appropriate for a research project, depending on how it is used. So how do you decide if a potential source can help you accomplish your purpose or answer your research question? Try optimizing your sources by using them different ways. The BEAM Method is one helpful way to describe how to use four different types of sources.

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### Background Source

- General information that is factual and objective – nothing controversial. Might also include “common knowledge” that is universally accepted within professional disciplines.
- Provides information needed by the readers to understand the subject/context.
- Examples might include encyclopedias or books with general introductions and overviews.

### Exhibit Source

- Used for interpretation or analysis; the writer presents and analyzes this kind of source.
- Provides an example to explain or give evidence to a claim. Remember exhibit sources may vary by field of study.
- For example, a literature paper could use a poem for analysis; a history paper could use a historical document; an art paper could use an image, a theater paper could use a film, and a sociology paper could use data collection from a study.

### Argument Source

- Heart of the paper; contains information from other authors you are agreeing with, disagreeing with, or building upon. This also constitutes a literature review in many disciplines.
- The claim within this source is either disputed or expanded to support a thesis statement or argument. Citing sources places a writer’s research in the context of other scholarship on that topic and essentially brings that writer into the scholarly conversation.
- If these sources are put into conversation with each other, a conclusion is often revealed.
- Examples might include newspaper editorials or controversial responses to your exhibit source.

### Method Source

- Materials an author follows to determine how they are doing their research.
- Offers key terms, a model, or a perspective; these sources guarantee that the reader will share the writer’s knowledge.
- Can define ways to understand an argument, determine a governing concept, or design a research study.
- Examples include research study procedures, methodologies, theories, strict definitions, and discipline specific vocabulary.


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