

Conducting & Interpreting Research

Doing historical research is a little like excavating an archaeological site. It requires patience, insight, imagination, as well as diligence and the right tools. As you find and examine primary sources, you need to imagine them in their original context and understand how your present-day point of view may distort your interpretation of them. You need to recognize not only your own biases but also the biases that shaped primary materials in their own period.

When evaluating sources, here is an acronym that may help your evaluation of research documents: **PAPER**

- ❖ Purpose of the author in preparing the document
- ❖ Argument and strategy used to achieve the purpose
- ❖ Presuppositions and values (in the text and your own)
- ❖ Epistemology (evaluating truth content)
- ❖ Relate to other texts (compare and contrast)



Research documents can be full of biases and inaccuracies.



Here are some important things to remember:

❖ **Evaluating the veracity (truthfulness) of documents:**

Consider the example of a soldier who committed atrocities against non-combatants during wartime. Later in his life, he writes a memoir that neglects to mention his role in these atrocities, and may in fact blame them on someone else. Knowing the soldier's possible motive, we would be right to question the veracity of his account.

❖ **The credible vs. the reliable document:**

Credibility refers to one's ability to trust the author's account of the truth on the basis of his/her tone and reliability.

Reliability refers to our ability to trust the consistency of the author's account of the truth. A reliable text displays a pattern of *verifiable* truth telling.

❖ **The objective vs. the neutral document:**

Neutrality refers to the stake an author has in a document. Does the author have an "axe to grind, which might render their words unreliable? Very few documents are ever completely neutral.

Objectivity refers to an author's ability to convey the truth free of underlying values, cultural presuppositions, and biases. Many scholars argue that no text is or ever can be completely objective, for all documents are the products of the culture in which their authors lived. The author who claims to be free of bias and presupposition should be treated with suspicion: no one is free of their values.

Partial List of Resources

Brooks Library is the first, best place to start your research. If they don't have it, they can get it. Below is a list of some key services.

- ❖ **Cattrax:** All books, government documents, periodicals, audio/visual, and microfilm in the Brooks Library.
- ❖ **Summit:** Pacific Northwest inter-library book loans
- ❖ **Illiad:** National inter-library book loans.
- ❖ **Electronic Databases:** Scholarly journals, such as JSTOR and Project Muse representing all disciplines.
- ❖ **Newspaper Archives:** Located in Brooks Library on the 3rd floor.

❖ **On-Line Sources:**

- American Memory: Historical collections from the Library of Congress
 - Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy
 - Eurodocs: Western European Primary Historical Documents
 - British National Archives: Documents Online
- ❖ **City/County/Church Archives & Records:** Many times, archives may exist in these locations. Don't be afraid to pick up the phone!
 - ❖ **Historical Society Records:** Many geographic regions will have a private historical society that maintains official, and non-official, records.
 - ❖ **Public Library:** As well as a great location for books, many libraries will have access to newspaper archives not available through CWU.

*Please refer to the CWU Library Brochure if you have any additional questions.
It is available at both the Library and the University Writing Center.*