Finding & Evaluating Scholarly Sources for FYP Papers

I'm Just Getting Started: Where to Begin?

Familiarize yourself with the research resources available to you through King's and Dalhousie's library system. Get to know the King's librarians. Endear yourself (socially distantly) to the librarians. Librarians have the best research resources.

NOTE: This document provides information about academic research but it is mostly focused on navigating academic journals. Nevertheless, many of the suggestions apply to books, too.

King's & Dalhousie Library Resources:

- King's Library website & Dalhousie's Library website
- FYP Study Guide – a tremendous guide prepared by the King's library
- King's & Dalhousie Librarians – invaluable supports for all stages of research.
- Library/Novanet catalogue searches – for books, print resources, multi-media, etc.
- Academic Journals (e.g., *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, *Feminist Theory*)
  - These are individual journals that publish academic articles. Different journals specialize in different fields, and they'll each have their own research areas and scopes, review practices, and publication standards.
- Academic Databases (e.g., J-Stor, ProQuest, Academic Search Premier, Web of Science)
  - These databases compile resources from some or all of the following sources: books, academic journals (including articles and book reviews), academic theses and dissertations. Materials can be found using a search function.
  - Conducting your search through an academic database provides a basic level of assurance about the academic integrity of the texts you find, since the search scope is restricted to academic materials.
  - Some databases are more helpful for some fields than for others – e.g., JStor is useful for the humanities; Web of Science may be more useful for the sciences.

Have I mentioned that you should befriend the librarians? I cannot underscore this enough: librarians are research wizards. If they don't know the answer, they know how to find it.

I'm in the Early Stages: Exploring Existing Research

If you have a general research area and have sketched an outline of your idea or argument, you might want to see what others have thought and written about the same subject. Here are some places to begin a general search:

- Search within an Academic Database – use the search function to browse for articles by keywords or phrases. For tips on conducting targeted searches, see the section on Boolean operators, below.

- <u>Browse within a Selected Journal</u> – search for relevant individual journals by keyword, then browse recent volumes for articles of interest.

- <u>Review the Bibliographies of Related Papers</u> – if you've found one article that works well for your research topic, review the bibliography. It's likely that it references other articles and books that might be relevant, too.

Another Potential Resource: Google Scholar: Google-search for scholarly work (broadly conceived). Use caution when searching through Google Scholar – not all sources have been verified for credibility and academic integrity (e.g., articles found on Academia.edu may be draft versions of hitherto unreviewed and unpublished papers, even if they've been written by an established expert in the field).

I'd Like to Narrow My Focus: Searching with Boolean Operators

Many search engines – including those used by academic databases like J-Stor and ProQuest – allow you to use Boolean operators to refine your search. You may find it useful to play with different combinations, as different searches will yield different results. If a basic search generates too many unrelated or loosely-related results, try a more targeted search; if a targeted search generates too few options, try again with broader parameters.

Here are some of the most common Boolean operators and how you may combine them:

Boolean Operator	Result
AND	Finds results that include BOTH of the search terms E.g., Machiavelli AND fortuna …will yield results that contains BOTH "Machiavelli" and "fortuna" in the text; it will exclude results that contain only one or the other but not both terms.
OR	Finds results that include EITHER / ANY of the search terms. E.g., Sophocles OR Antigone …will yield results that contain "Sophocles" OR "Antigone" OR BOTH in the text; it will exclude results that contain neither term.
NOT	Excludes results that contain the search term E.g., Meditations NOT Aurelius …will search for articles that contain the term "Meditations" but not "Aurelius." This is helpful if you're writing on a text whose title is shared with the work of another author, because you can exclude the name of the other author.
(Parentheses)	Allows you to combine search terms. E.g., Meditations AND (Descartes OR Nietzsche) …will search for results that contain "Meditations" AND EITHER Descartes OR Nietzsche OR BOTH. E.g., Descartes NOT (Meditations OR Passions) …will search for results that contain "Descartes" BUT NEITHER "Meditations" NOR "Passions." E.g., Meditations AND Descartes NOT (Aurelius OR Nietzsche)

	…will search for results that contain BOTH Meditations AND Descartes BUT NEITHER Aurelius NOR Nietzsche NOR both. E.g., Meditations AND Descartes NOT (Aurelius AND Nietzsche) …will search for results that contain BOTH Meditations AND Descartes BUT NOT BOTH Aurelius AND Nietzsche.
" "	Allows you to group search terms as a single unit. E.g., "Second Sex" …will search for results that include those two terms together, as a phrase, in that order. For research on Beauvoir's text, this will be much more effective that searching for, e.g., Second AND Sex.
NEAR 5 NEAR 10 NEAR 25	Allows you to search for terms that you'd like to be close but not necessarily adjacent. E.g., gender NEAR 5 Nietzsche …will search for results in which "gender" appears within 5 terms of "Nietzsche." Note: This search operator cannot be combined with parentheses, E.g., "gender identity" NEAR 10 Nietzsche. This will not work.

?	? can be used to replace a character, if you'd like your search to include similar terms.
	
	E.g., wom?n
	      …will search for "woman" and "women" and "womyn"
	E.g., Smit?
	      …will search for "Smith" and "smite," etc. but not Smithsonian (for that, use an asterisk, as below).

*	* can be used to include additional characters at the end of a word, if you'd like your search to include similar terms.
	
	E.g., human*
	      …will find results including "human," "humans," "humanity," "humanness," etc.
	E.g., bird*
	      …will find results including "bird," "birds," "birdwatching," "birdseed," etc.

A targeted search will yield more focused results, which is especially useful if the topic is broad or has received extensive attention (e.g., for research on gender in *Macbeth*, "Shakespeare AND Macbeth will generate a lot of results, whereas "Shakespeare AND Macbeth AND gender" would limit the scope). Conversely, a broader search is more inclusive if the topic is a niche area of research (e.g., "Dante AND wom?n" or "Dante AND Beatrice" will likely be more helpful than "Dante AND "female archetypes").

I'm Looking for Something Specific: Accessing Particular Articles

If you've found an article title/reference and you'd like to access the full document:

1. Access the journal directly using the library's website.
   a. If the library has a subscription to the article you need, great! Search the library's holdings for the journal you need. If the journal is accessible via multiple

databases, choose one that includes the year of the article you need. Then, browse the journal by year to find the volume and/or issue and/or pages you need. This is the most direct route.

2. If the library does *not* offer access to the journal you need, or if the library has access but not for the particular volume you need, try searching for the article via an academic database like J-Stor or ProQuest. Consider using the "advanced search" option or Boolean operators to narrow your search (including the title keywords, author name, journal title, volume, year, etc.).

3. If you're still unable to find or to access the source, ask a librarian for further assistance. (You're good friends with the librarians, right?)

4. If all else fails, you may contact the author directly to request a copy of their article. In your email, introduce yourself and politely state your interest in their work (e.g., you might say that you are writing a paper on X, and that you think their article entitled "Y" might be helpful for such-and-such reasons). Note that researchers' response rates vary; explore other options before going this route, especially if you're on a deadline!

I've Found an Article, Now What? Evaluating Secondary Sources

The question "Is this source suitable for my paper?" will depend on a number of different factors, including the topic of your paper. That makes it difficult to provide a definitive rule. As a general guideline, you should be able to answer all of the following questions in the affirmative:

- Is the author qualified to write on this subject?
  - Do they have relevant education, training, and/or extensive experience to qualify them to research and write on this topic?
  - Does the author have a good reputation for producing high-quality research? (This can be very difficult to judge, especially if you're unfamiliar with the author or their work. If you're unsure, ask a librarian or your tutor)

- Does the work appear in a credible and trustworthy publication? Was the work reviewed or otherwise verified prior to publication, to ensure its credibility?
  - More reliable: books by academic/university-affiliated and established publishers (e.g., Cambridge University Press, Penguin Random House), academic journals (*Philosophy and Literature*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Science*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, *AlterNative*, etc.), resources found through academic databases like JStor and Academic Search Premier.
  - Less reliable or inappropriate as academic sources: personal and professional blogs and websites, self-published books, Wikipedia.[1] Newspaper articles may be more or less reliable, depending on the article and how you'll be using it; ask your tutor or a librarian for guidance if you're unsure.
  - The gold standard for academic research is: double-blind peer-reviewed. Books and journals published by established publishers – e.g., university presses (McGill

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[1] Wikipedia may be a place to begin your search or to refresh your memory about a text that you've read, but it should not be used as an academic source. The information that appears on Wikipedia may be incomplete, misleading, or difficult to verify independently, and it can be difficult to evaluate the authors' expertise. Wikipedia pages are also dynamic, which means that the page you cite may be different by the time your tutor attempts to verify it.

University Press, etc.) – can be reasonably expected to have been subjected to credible review processes.

When evaluating a source, your goal is to determine whether you can trust the information it contains, since your argument will be engaging with it or relying on it. When in doubt: ask your tutor or a librarian for guidance.

Some Easier and Harder Cases, as Examples:

- Relatively Reliable:
  An academic article on magical symbolism in *Macbeth*, written by a university professor in Comparative Literature, and published in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, would likely be a credible resource for a paper on a similar topic. The author has relevant and reliable credentials, and the article is published in a well-respected peer-reviewed journal in the field. No red flags, here.

- Likely Unreliable:
  A paper outlining different approaches in stem cell therapy, written by a university professor in Philosophy and published on their colleague's professional blog, would likely not qualify as a suitable source for a paper on the effectiveness of stem cell therapies. Though the author has academic credentials, those credentials are not in a field that obviously qualifies them to speak on the research subject. (The case might be different if, for example, the article was about the *ethics* of stem cell therapies, and the professor was an ethicist). Even if the blog post was verified by the author's colleague, it would be difficult to ascertain whether there were conflicts of interest in the review process, given their professional relationship. Proceed with caution and/or ask for guidance. NOTE: The information in such a blog post may be entirely true; the point is that the details outlined above do not provide sufficient credibility for relying on this source. Accordingly, you'd need to evaluate the content yourself, and this would be almost impossible unless you yourself have the relevant expertise to evaluate it.

- Almost Definitely Unreliable
  A blog post about vaginal steaming, written by Gwyneth Paltrow and published on her lifestyle blog *Goop*, is <u>not</u> a suitable source for an academic paper on vaginal health. Ms. Paltrow has neither expertise nor training in this area; *Goop* self-publishes its writing and, at the time of writing this, the website's content was not independently verified for credulity by any reputable organization or authority free of related commercial interests). Such a blog post *might* provide a relevant example for a paper about Hollywood pseudo-scientific "wellness" fads, but its value beyond that is questionable, at best. In any case, it is unlikely that this kind of source will be relevant or reputable enough for a FYP paper.

Evaluating secondary sources takes time and critical judgment. Doing so well relies on expertise that, as undergraduate students, you may be still in the process of developing. Your tutors and professors are not expecting you to be experts in evaluating academic research; we are expecting you to use your critical thinking and best judgment, and to ask us (or a librarian) if you have any doubts or uncertainties. Remember: this is an apprenticeship program – we all learn together.