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# Locating and Engaging Credible Sources

Good writing often follows good research. Research includes locating quality sources, understanding the difference between primary and secondary sources, and using these materials to support analysis and development of an argument.

Students will be asked frequently to locate and consult “scholarly sources,” but not every introductory student has a grasp on what a credible scholarly source in art history entails. In general, credible sources are available in print and come from reputable presses, scholars, and institutions, though for some assignments different kinds of sources might be acceptable. In short, context matters when selecting and utilizing research materials. Below is an outline of some of the main kinds of sources cited in art historical writing. For additional help in locating material in art history through our library’s resources, consult the Subject Guide here: <https://libguides.lib.miamioh.edu/arthistory> (<https://libguides.lib.miamioh.edu/arthistory>)

## Reference materials

This is the most basic place to find factual information about works of art or movements. Scholarly reference materials include sources like museum websites for the collection that houses a work of art, Smarthistory, and the Oxford Dictionary of Art. While these are vetted by scholars (unlike Wikipedia, which should be avoided beyond initial inquiry), they offer only a first level of scholarly engagement. These are often acceptable sources to cite in introductory classes, but should only be used as a jumping off point for more advanced research assignments.

## Primary sources

These are the bread and butter of any historical discipline. Primary sources involve texts that are directly related to the historical artifact, person, or period in question. Primary sources cited frequently in art history include artists’ statements or interviews, exhibition reviews, literature or writing from the time period, letters, documents of sale or purchase, and others.

## Secondary sources

Secondary sources include writings completed at a level of remove from the artwork, artist, or period in question. These provide interpretive arguments and frameworks built upon engagement with the art, relevant primary sources, theoretical constructs, and other secondary literature. In a way, your writing assignment can be considered a secondary source in process.

Acceptable places to find scholarly secondary sources include peer-reviewed journals, edited volumes, exhibition catalogs, and scholarly monographs (single-authored books). It is generally *not* acceptable to cite secondary sources that are just on websites (this includes even .edu pages, which are often just references for class materials, or even class projects). There are some instances where websites are credible primary or secondary sources, such as artist’s statements on their webpages and more substantial research articles through museum websites. When in doubt, consult with either your professor or a librarian.

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