CSC: CoR: Chapter 5: From Problems to Sources

The 10 **salient sentence strings** presented below are lifted from the chapter as is, without modification (except, perhaps, for a bit of punctuation here or there). They are presented in order of appearance in the chapter.

Ten Salient Sentence Strings

1. Primary sources are "original" materials that provide you with the "raw data" or evidence you will use to develop, test, and ultimately justify your hypothesis or claim. What kinds of materials count as primary sources vary significantly by field.

2. Secondary sources are books, articles, or reports that are based on primary sources and are intended for scholarly or professional audiences. The body of secondary sources in a field is sometimes called that field's "literature." The best secondary sources are books from reputable university presses and articles or reports that have been "peer-reviewed," meaning that they were vetted by experts in the field before they were published. Researchers read secondary sources to keep up with developments in their fields and, in this way, to stimulate their own thinking. The standard way of framing new research problems is to challenge or build on the conclusions or methods of others, as presented in secondary sources they have written.

3. [Tertiary sources] are books and articles that synthesize and report on secondary sources for general readers, such as textbooks, articles in encyclopedias (including *Wikipedia*), and articles in mass-circulation publications like *Psychology Today*. In the early stages of research, you can use tertiary sources to get a feel for a topic. But if you are making a scholarly argument, you should rely on secondary sources, because these make up the "conversation" in which you are seeking to participate. If you cite tertiary sources in a scholarly argument, you will mark yourself as either a novice or an outsider, and many readers won't take you—or your argument—seriously.

4. It is also important to understand that the classifications of primary, secondary, and tertiary are not absolute but relative to a researcher's project. In most instances, an article in a scholarly journal would generally be considered a secondary source. But it would become a primary source if your research problem concerned its author or the field itself: if, for example, you are writing the author's biography or trying to figure out whether patriotic historians have distorted stories of the Alamo. Likewise, an encyclopedia article would usually be considered a tertiary source, but it would become a primary source if you were studying the way encyclopedias deal with gender issues. T. S. Eliot's essay "Hamlet and His Problems" would be a primary source if you were studying Eliot but a secondary source if you were studying Shakespeare.

5. Because *so much* information is now at our fingertips, libraries are more essential than ever when conducting research. Libraries not only let us access information but also ensure that our sources are reliable. Even if your public or academic library is comparatively small, it can serve as a *portal* to a much broader range of resources—research guides, reference works, and online databases—that extends the library's reach.

6. Compiled by experts, both general reference works such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and more specialized works such as the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* will give you the lay of the land, so that later it will be easier to see how your sources fit within the bigger picture. In addition, reference works often include citations or bibliographies that can lead you to sources you might otherwise overlook. Especially valuable at early stages of research are bibliographic works, many of which provide abstracts summarizing significant articles or books on a topic. Look, especially, for annotated bibliographies or annual literature reviews that sum up recent books or articles; these offer the most promising leads for your research.

7. A single source can lead to others and return you to catalogs and databases you have already visited, only this time with new search terms. Novice researchers often rely too heavily on only a few terms or on terms that prove to be too broad—or narrow—to call up relevant sources. Successful researchers know they have to be flexible: searches typically involve trial and error to discover those terms that will yield the most relevant sources.

8. Many online catalogs and databases let you look up other sources that cite one that you already know. This technique, called citation indexing, is like following a bibliographic trail, forward or backward. Instead of searching for sources that a given source cites, backward citation, you can search for sources that cite a given source, or forward citation. A source's credibility can thus be gauged both by the sources it cites and by the sources that cite it. The more a given source is later cited, the greater its reputation and its impact factor.

9. When you look beyond the standard *kinds* of references relevant to your question, you enrich not only your analysis but your range of intellectual reference and your ability to synthesize diverse kinds of data, a crucial competence of an inquiring mind. Don't ignore a work on your topic that is not mentioned in the bibliographies of your most relevant sources—you will get credit for originality if you turn up a good source that others have ignored.

10. Don't panic if you find a source that seems to pose and solve precisely your problem [...]. If the source does in fact settle your exact question, you have to formulate a new one. But the question your source asked is probably not as close to yours as you first feared. And you may find that you can do the source one better: if the author failed to get things entirely right, you have an unwitting ally in formulating your problem.