

How do I choose my source material?

STEP

UNIT B

6

'The way to do research is to attack the facts.'

Celia Green

A

Reflection

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the following sources to research your essays?

- your reading list
- academic journals
- online podcasts/lectures
- Wikipedia®
- academic books
- Google Scholar
- general books on the subject

B

Contextualization

Imagine that you have been asked to answer this essay question: 'What are the characteristics of good academic writing?' Details of one of your sources are below.

- Consider the following four questions about this source.
 1. Is it relevant?
 2. Is it authoritative?
 3. Is it recent?
 4. Is it reliable?

Title	EAP: Issues and directions
Authors	Ken Hyland, Liz Hamp-Lyons
Publication	<i>Journal of English for Academic Purposes</i> , 1, 1: 1-12
Keywords	English (second language); English for academic purposes; scholarly journals; second language instruction; second language learning

Extract from abstract

The field of English for Academic Purposes has developed rapidly in the past 25 years to become a major force in English language teaching and research. Drawing its strength from broad theoretical foundations and a commitment to research-based language education, EAP has begun to reveal some of the constraints of social contexts on language use and to develop ways for learners to gain control over these.

Contents

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. EAP, ESP and JEAP | 6. Disciplinary variation or similarity |
| 2. What is EAP? | 7. The concept of 'community' |
| 3. The growth of English for Academic Purposes | 8. New genres and new technologies |
| 4. Users of 'academic' English | 9. Accommodation or critique |
| 5. 'Academic literacy' | 10. Conclusions |

Sample

First sentence: 'The growth of English as the leading language for the dissemination of academic knowledge has transformed the educational experiences of countless students, who must now gain fluency in the conventions of English language academic discourses to understand their disciplines and to successfully navigate their learning.'

Random sentence from middle: 'However, the full implications of this communications revolution are not yet apparent or completely understood, and we still have a long way to go before we can be sure we are using its potential most effectively in our teaching.'

C Analysis

Strengths and drawbacks of certain source materials

Your reading list

- ✓ The people who will be marking your essay – experts in their field – have recommended this list. You should trust their opinion.
- ✗ The list may be extremely long and unrealistic and may reflect your lecturer's bias/interest.

Wikipedia® (en.Wikipedia.org)

- ✓ Can be a good starting point for research, especially if you know little about the subject.
- ✗ It is not considered an appropriate academic source as it may be subjective and biased.

Google Scholar (scholar.google.co.uk)

- ✓ Identifies purely academic sources (e.g., books, abstracts, articles, theses), providing an indication of how popular/respected they are among the academic community.
- ✗ You may have to pay to read some of the material which it identifies.

Academic journals

- ✓ Easy to search, should be available through your university and up-to-date.
- ✗ Can be difficult/technical/focused on very specific issues.

Academic books

- ✓ Tend to be authoritative and well-respected.
- ✗ Texts can be long and difficult to understand.

General books on the subject

- ✓ May offer a useful introduction to the subject (if they are written in a non-academic style).
- ✗ May not be considered appropriate academic sources and may trivialize certain issues.

Online podcasts/lectures

- ✓ A good resource if your listening skills are better than your reading skills.
- ✗ Can be time-consuming – difficult to get a quick overview (unlike a reading text).

How can I choose my source material?

Besides asking the four questions noted on page 27, talk to people on your course or who took the course last year. They may be able to provide useful recommendations.

Question 1: Is it relevant?

You will have a lot of reading. As a non-native speaker, this may take a long time. You will probably not have time to read everything you want to – so be selective. Everything you read should be directly related to your essay title.

Strategy 1: Read the ABSTRACT

This gives an overview of the book/paper, probably including the research topic; the specific study area; methodology; key findings. A brief analysis will indicate how appropriate the source is.

- ✓ 'The field of English for Academic Purposes' – relevant to the essay question.
- ✓ 'Broad theoretical foundations' – implies it will be wide-ranging and quite general.
- ✓ 'To develop ways for learners to gain' – suggests it might be student-focused.

Strategy 2: Read the TABLE OF CONTENTS/INDEX/KEYWORDS

A table of contents gives an overview of the book's chapters; the index indicates specific ideas. Both can be used to focus research on the sections of most value to you.

- ✓ '4. Users of "academic" English' and '5. "Academic literacy"' – these sections indicate that they might be particularly useful in answering your essay question.
- ✗ '1. EAP, ESP and JEAP' and '6. Disciplinary variation or similarity' – these sections use abbreviations/technical language, indicating that the intended audience may be experts.

Strategy 3: Read an extract

Are you the intended audience of the book? Is the level too easy or too difficult? If you cannot understand much from the extract, the book will be of little use to you.

- ❓ By looking at a sample of the writing, you must make this judgement yourself.

Question 2: Is it authoritative?

There is no point in using the ideas of people who are not respected in your academic field.

Strategy 4: Identify the publishers

If the book/article has been published by a well-respected publisher (e.g., a good **UNIVERSITY PRESS**, a major publishing company), you can assume the publication has a certain quality. These publishers are unlikely to publish material they think is factually inaccurate or extremely biased. If, however, it is by a **VANITY** publisher, its 'authority' may be less.

- ❓ *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* – a respected journal in its field; experts in the field have judged this article to be of the necessary quality. However, the journal is aimed at professionals, so the level may be inappropriate for a student.

Question 3: Is it recent?

Scholarship moves forward quickly. In some subjects (e.g., robotics), even five years is a long time. You must judge whether the information is still relevant to your topic.

Strategy 5: Look at the date the book was published

- ❓ '2002'. Although in ten years the core principles of academic writing will probably not have changed much, some of the content about 'new technologies' may not be relevant. You may want to compare this source with more recent sources as well.

Question 4: Is it reliable?

Since people can publish material more easily than ever before (mainly via the Internet), reliability is an increasingly important issue. **Step 7** and **Step 8** focus on these issues.

D Activation

Which types of sources would be most useful if ...

1. ... you have no idea about a particular subject?

2. ... you want specific academic information about a topic?

3. ... you have a good understanding of the topic and want to deepen your understanding?

4. ... you are tired of/bored with reading and want a change?

E Personalization

What is your current practice?

- Make a list of the sources which you used for a recent essay.
- Ask yourself the four questions given in part B.
- Make yourself a table (see below – this can be photocopied from Appendix 1, Step 6, Document 1) and fill it in accordingly with a tick, a cross or a question mark.

Source	Relevant?	Authoritative?	Recent?	Reliable?	Comments	Read?
Name of source	✓ ? X	✓ ? X	✓ ? X	✓ ? X	Any relevant comments which might help you decide whether to read the source later.	✓ ? X

- The information in the right-hand column will help you prioritize which sources you are going to use first.

F Extension

- Step 7 examines the advantages and disadvantages of using the **Internet** for research.
- Step 8 enhances your **critical thinking skills**, enabling you to make better judgements about your sources.
- Step 13 develops your ability to understand **essay titles** and therefore how to be more selective in your reading.
- Step 49 looks in more detail at **abstracts**, which can be useful in deciding whether or not to read a source.
- Appendix 4, Step 5 provides hyperlinks for websites which may help you research your essay.
- Appendix 1, Step 6, Document 1 provides the table from part E above in photocopiable form, to help you evaluate your potential source material.