Guide to Finding the Right Research

When I first began reading and writing for my college classes, it seemed like I was learning a foreign language. I just couldn't understand why the expectations were so different. But I began to realize the importance of credibility, doing the research needed to really understand all sides of my topic, and backing up my opinions about the topic with strong evidence.

I also learned that not all evidence is equal. Some of the things I was reading just weren't credible and weren't supported with strong evidence. I slowly learned how to determine what evidence best supported my claims when writing my research papers. These are the guidelines that I like to use to make sure the research I find is worthy of my time and consideration:

Types of Evidence and Questions to Consider for Each

Statistics

Statistics refers to data collected, that is, numbers and percentages. Numbers may seem like hard facts, but they still must be considered and interpreted to know if they are useful and accurate. Question the statistics you find:

- Are the statistics recent? Statistics change over time.
- Is the source of the statistics credible and unbiased? Don’t believe everything you read. Be skeptical first.
- How do the statistics relate to your claim? Do they really support the argument you are making? They should.

Expert Opinion

An expert opinion refers to someone who is an expert on the topic and their conclusions or decisions about the topic. An example of an expert would be a heart doctor who is discussing heart health. Question the opinions you find:
• Is the person/organization really an expert on this topic? Find out more about the person’s credentials.
• Is the person/organization unbiased or do they have something to gain from their opinion? Be skeptical about why this person or organization is trying to persuade you.

Research Studies

Research studies refer to research that was done by a person or group to test a theory or to reach some conclusions about a research question. Question the research studies you find:

• How recent was this research study done? The data may change over time.
• Who did this research study and are they credible and unbiased? Again, be skeptical first.
• How does this research study relate to the claim you are making? Be sure it supports your specific claim and isn’t just related to your overall topic.

Historical Evidence

Historical evidence refers to a situation in the past that works to support a claim about a current situation. Or this evidence could also be a physical artifact that works to support a claim. Question the historical evidence you find:

• Is the historical situation similar enough to the current situation? It should be relevant and similar enough so that it supports your claim.
• Is this historical event or artifact a single isolated occurrence? If so, is this information enough to support your claim? A single occurrence is likely not enough to establish efficient support.

Anecdotal Evidence and Personal Anecdotes

Anecdotes refer to personal stories about yourself or another person. Question the anecdotes you find:

• Is the anecdote a highly unlikely occurrence, or is it something that regularly occurs to others, too? A very isolated occurrence cannot act to support a claim. It needs to be common enough to show that it could continue to happen.
• Is the anecdote similar enough to the situation you are writing about? Be sure there are no other factors at work that could have led to the anecdote.

Whether you’re just starting in college classes or have been enrolled for some time, taking a step back and reviewing best practices for research is always a good idea.

The writer uses bulleted lists to outline and organize points. Again, this makes it easy for readers to scan.

It is vital to proofread and edit your work. Make certain it’s free from grammatical and punctuation errors.

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