Al-Farabi Kazakh National University

Faculty of Journalism

"Academic Writing" course.

Lecture 11. Engaging with Sources

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Lecture 11.

11. Engaging with Sources

Learning Objectives

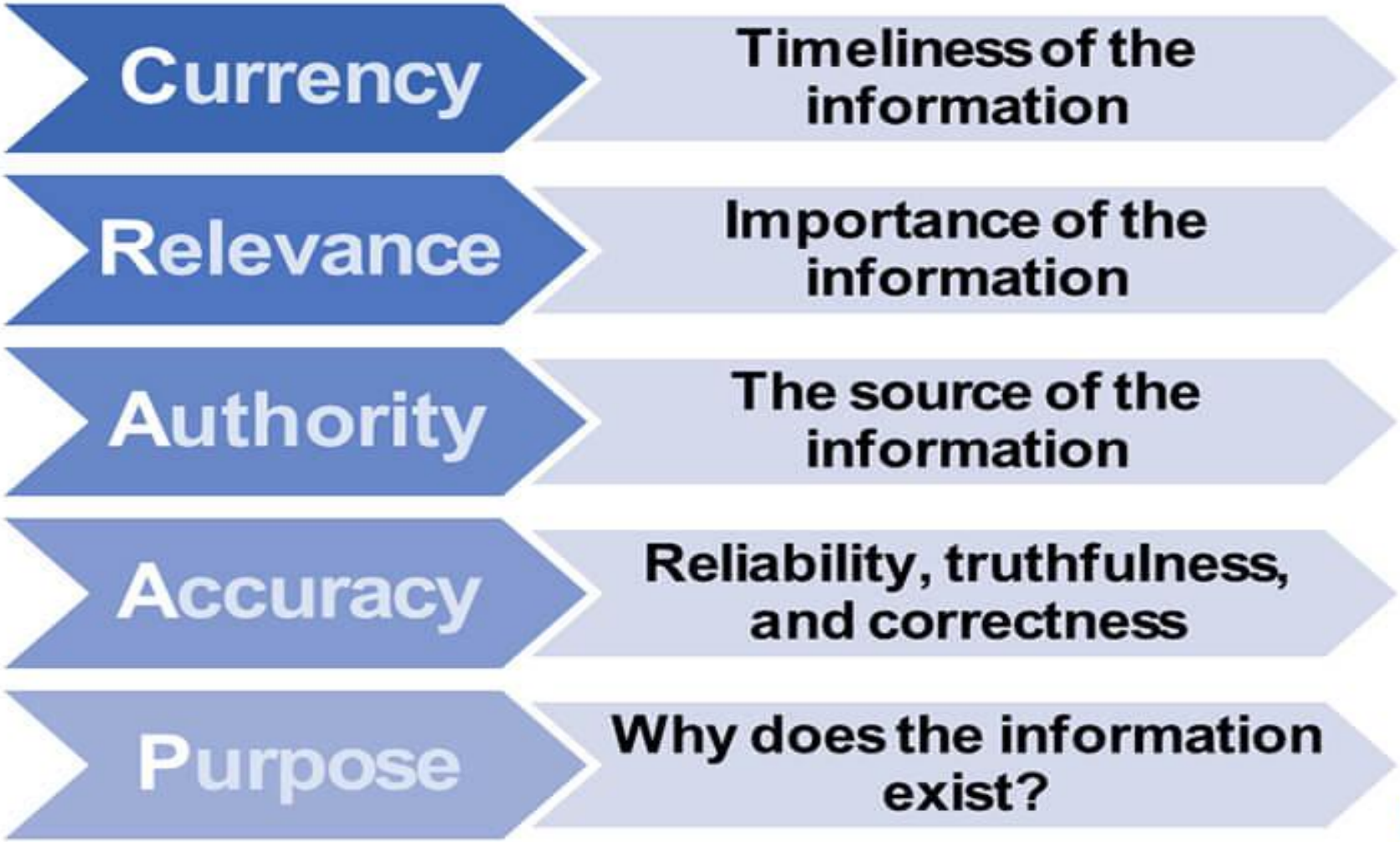
11.1. Engaging With Sources Effectively

11.2. Basic Ways to Engage with Sources Effectively

11.3. Strategies for Engaging Critically From Start to Finish

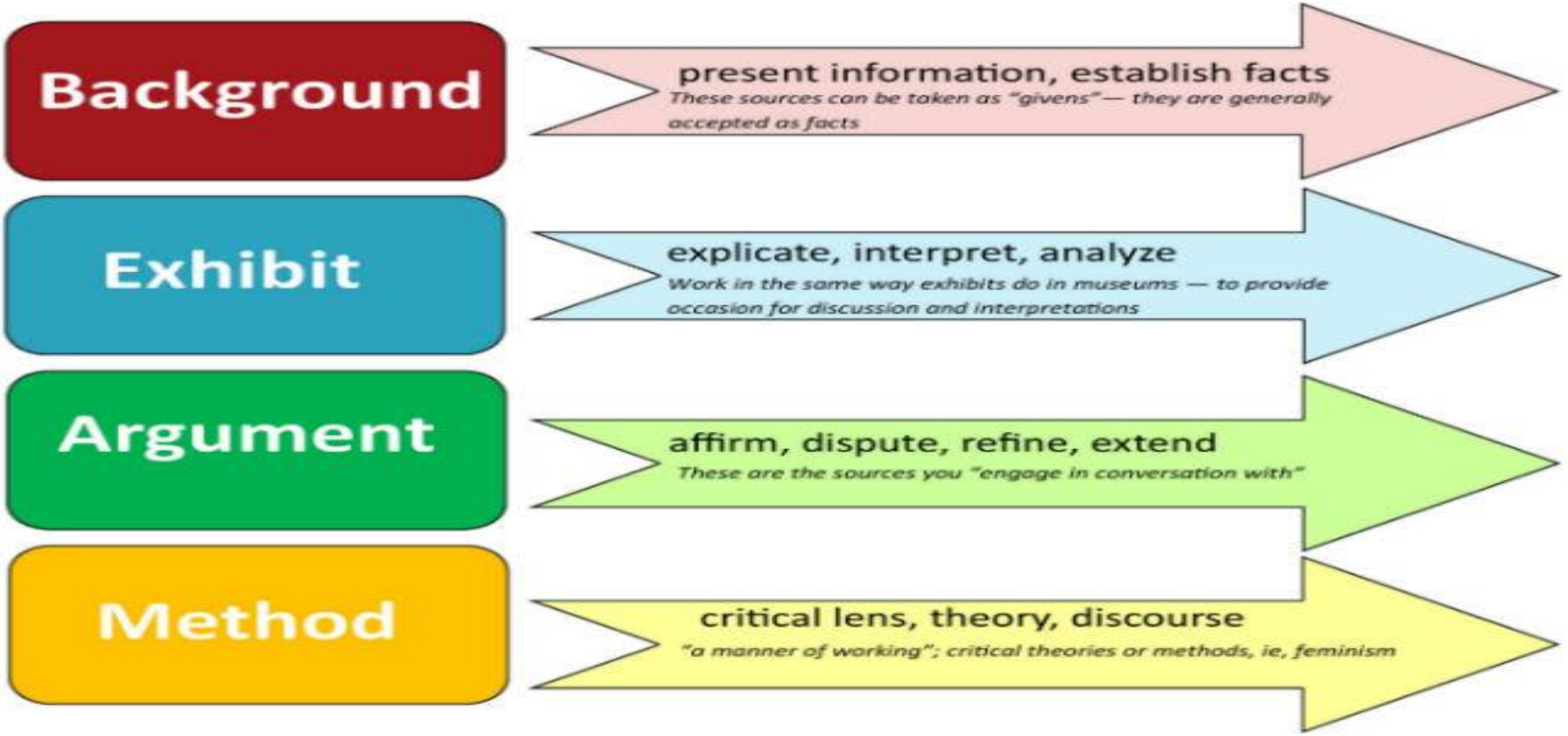
The three ways to integrate sources effectively that allow writers to provide evidence and support for their argument, enter the scholarly conversation, and give credit to the original authors of the work that has helped and informed them. Sources also encourage writers to share their own knowledge and authority with others, help readers find additional sources related to the topic they are interested in, and protect you by giving credit where credit is due (thus avoiding plagiarism). In other words, sources are much more than just something we add on at the end of our writing!

When writing about a source or simply referencing it, we are positioning ourselves in response to, or in conversation with that source, with the goal of focusing our writing on our own argument/thesis. Sources do not stand on their own within a piece of writing and that is why, alongside finding strong and reputable sources worth responding to and making sure that we fully understand sources (even before writing about them), it is critical to engage with our sources in meaningful ways. But how exactly do we effectively engage with our sources in our writing?


Currency
Timeliness of the information
Relevance
Importance of the information
Authority
The source of the information
Accuracy
Reliability, truthfulness, and correctness
Purpose
Why does the information exist?

Joseph Harris, in *How To Do Things with Texts*, presents four different ways of "rewriting the work of others", three of which provide insight into the how of engaging sources. When a writer forwards the work of another writer, they are applying the concepts, topics, or terms from one reading, text, or situation to a different reading, text or situation. By countering the ideas found in source material, a writer argues "against the grain of a text" by underlining and countering ideas that a writer may be in disagreement with. Taking an approach is the adaptation of a theory or method from one writer to a new set of issues or texts. Harris' book provides a thorough classification of methods to engage with a source. For something a little simpler, here are three basic ways you can get started effectively engaging with sources (Harris 5-7).

What could you do with this type of source?



Adapted from Kate Ganski's blog, http://bit.ly/1ahnF3b; informed by Joseph Bizup's 2008 article "BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-Based Writing", *Rhetoric Review, 27:1, 72-86)*

3 Basic Ways to Engage with Sources Effectively

- **Disagree and Explain Why.** Persuade your reader that the argument or information in a source should be questioned or challenged.
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- **Agree, But With Your Own Take.** Add something new to the conversation. Expand a source's insights or argument to a new situation or your own example. Provide new evidence and discuss new implications.
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- **Agree and Disagree Simultaneously.** This is a nuanced approach to complex sources or complex topics. You can, for example, agree with a source's overall thesis, but disagree with some of its reasoning or evidence.

Remember that this is not an exhaustive list. When engaging with others' sources as a way to support our own ideas and argument, it is crucial that we engage with critical thinking, nuance, and objectivity to ensure that we are constructing unbiased, thoughtful, and compelling arguments.

Some of the different areas throughout your essay that will benefit from effective engagement with source material include: your thesis statement, analysis, and conclusion.

- **Thesis Statement.** The argument that you make in your thesis statement can challenge, weaken, support, or strengthen what is being argued by your source or sources.

- **Analysis.** Thorough analysis in your body paragraphs emphasize the role of your argument in comparison to that found in your source material. Bring your analysis back to your thesis statement to reinforce the connection between the two.

- **Conclusion.** Consider the “big picture” or “takeaways” to leave your reader with.
  There are many other, sometimes optional, essay sections or writing styles that benefit from critical engagement with a source. These can include literature reviews, reflections, critiques, and so on.

Strategies for Engaging Critically From Start to Finish

1. Aim to dig deeper than surface level. Ask the 'how' and 'why' of a source, as well as 'how' and 'why' it is relevant to the topic at hand and the argument you are making.
2. Ask yourself if you've addressed every possible question, concern, critique, or "what if" that comes to mind; put yourself in the place of your readers.
3. Use TEAL body paragraph development as a template and guide for developing thorough analysis in your body paragraphs. Effectively engaging with your sources is essential to the analysis portion of the TEAL formula and to creating meaningful engagement with your sources.

It can be a bit scary to be told to "engage" with your sources. After all, who are you to decide what's right and what's wrong? The research you've been looking at was carried out by people who have spent years in the field, and you're just beginning your academic career.

First, it's liberating to realise that you don't have to take a side or attack in order to engage. All that you have to do is situate different research positions against one another. Where do the positions overlap? Can the insights of one approach be captured in the other? What objections have been raised? Are they insuperable? Asking even a few of these questions will have you on the way to a deeper engagement with your sources.

Of course, you may very well want to criticise, and that's a good thing. But it's usually best to underplay your hand here. It's certainly possible that your insights completely demolish an established research program, but it's much more likely that you've actually misread whatever it is that you're attacking. Don't claim victory prematurely.

Instead, make your criticism all about finding issues and presenting them to the reader for judgement. Look for contradictions in what people say. Check the accuracy of the data that's presented. Could certain effects be explained by a different cause? Is there a piece of counterevidence that was overlooked? If you've come up with enough reasons to be suspicious of someone's claim, you won't need to huff and puff to blow it over.

On the contrary, it's important to be generous in how you read your opponents. The game you're playing is not about piling up as many advantages for your side as possible and setting them beside a heap of disadvantages for the other side. Having an obviously biased approach like that makes it look as though you either don't fully understand the problem or are being dishonest about it. Neither is a good look for a researcher. In Scientific Writing for Psychology, Robert Kail points out that incomplete or biased descriptions of research annoy the reader. I think that's true whether the reader is on your side of the argument or not.

Try to present different views as fairly as you can. I always try to imagine the researchers whose work I'm writing about coming across my paper. I wouldn't need them to agree with my views, but I wouldn't want them to feel as though they'd been mistreated.

Of course, you may fully agree with what a paper has to say. This can almost be worse, in a way: you might think there's not much more to write than "me, too". But claims can nearly always be bolstered by additional evidence. And sometimes old claims can be applied to new areas in new ways. The claims you agree with might be vulnerable to counterarguments in their current forms, so you can provide them with the additional support they need to fend off attacks.

What's important is that engagement with research is a very different activity from, for instance, clicking "like" or "dislike" on online videos. Too many papers have brief summaries of articles followed by the equivalent of "loved it" or "nonsense". You're asked to read sources not so that you can rate them, but rather so that you can assemble them into an detailed picture of what the research community has to say about whatever topic you've chosen to discuss.

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https://skillscentre.ppls.ed.ac.uk/2018/07/06/engaging-with-your-sources/