

Name:

Date:

Section:

Selecting Useful Information

What is it? When you research a topic, you need to determine which information is useful and which isn't. Useful information is relevant, essential, and verifiable. Information is relevant if it is connected to your topic. Information is essential if you cannot answer your research question without it. Information is verifiable if you can find it in other reliable sources.

How to do it. Examine each piece of information in your reading. Does it help define, explain, or give details about your topic? Can you verify the information?

Try it. Suppose that you are researching this question: What was daily life like for a Civil War soldier? You have found firsthand information in letters from a Union soldier to his mother. In a table, list information from the reading. Decide whether it is relevant, essential, and verifiable for your topic. An example has been done for you.

For a few days . . . both armies are on very friendly terms. Well today I was out on the line and there was a lot of Rebs there and one of them invited me to go with him . . . Had a great chat . . .

Desertions from their army are quite numerous . . . I had on a pair of fine Gaiters and one of them asked me the price. I told him and he said they would cost in Petersburg \$150. Common shoes cost 60 & 70 Dolls. Common letter paper 50 cts per sheet & mighty hard to get at that. They say themselves that they have had no coffee or sugar for 4 weeks.

You need not be alarmed about my health for I have good heavy blanket and warm clothes. My boots was not very good but we have all drawn a good pair of government shoes . . . There is about half a dozen men in our regiment that are sick.

Is the Information Relevant?

Is it Essential?

Is it Verifiable?

Selecting Credible Sources: Primary Sources

What is it? A primary source is a record or an artifact from the past that was created by someone who witnessed an event or lived through an era. Examples are letters, diaries, interviews, photos, and things such as tools, clothing, or weapons.

How to do it. To select a primary source that is credible, or believable, you must ask questions about the source.

- Who created this source? What was its purpose?
- Is there any reason to think that the creator might exaggerate, leave out important information, or not tell the truth? You might need to find out more about the source or its creator. You might also compare the source to other views of the same event.

Try it. Suppose that you are researching this question: Who was to blame for the Boston Massacre? “Boston Massacre” is the American name for a fight between British troops and a crowd of angry colonists in 1770. The colonists started a small riot, and British soldiers killed five of them.

Consider the following primary sources, and answer the questions about them.

1. Trial testimony of Dr. John Jeffries, who treated a wounded colonist who later died
2. Trial testimony of one of the British soldiers who fired at the colonists
3. A flyer entitled “An account of a late military massacre at Boston,” published in New York in 1770
4. An engraving that shows soldiers firing on unarmed citizens, created by Paul Revere, a silversmith living in Boston in 1770.

What is the Source?

1. Dr. Jeffries

2

3.

4.

Credible or not credible? Why?

1. Yes as he was doctor and they are typically honest. However he may have opinion that makes him less credible.

2

3.

4.

What else would you like to know about the source?

1. Did he have someone important in his life die as a result of the war?

2

3.

4.

Selecting Credible Sources: Secondary Sources

What is it? A secondary source is a record created by someone who did not personally experience the event described. Examples of secondary sources include encyclopedias, almanacs, biographies, and textbooks.

How to do it. To select a secondary source that is credible, or believable, you must ask questions about the source.

- Who is the author? What is the author's background? What else has the author written? Does the author belong to a group with a certain point of view?
- How recently was the source created or updated? If it was created long ago, where could you look for more recent sources?
- Why was the source created? Is it meant to give facts or to explain what happened? Does it try to persuade you to see things a certain way?

Try it. Suppose that you are researching this question: What was everyday life like for enslaved Africans in the American colonies? Consider the following secondary sources, and complete the table. Tell what you would like to know further about each source.

1. Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South, by Carl Bridenbaugh, 1952. Bridenbaugh was a professor of American history at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Brown University.
2. Resource Guide: Slavery, on Digital History, a U.S. history Web site developed and maintained by the University of Houston, updated December 2005.
3. American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses, published anonymously in 1839. Written by Theodore Dwight Weld, an antislavery activist.
4. Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South, edited by Eric L. McKittrick, 1963. A collection of proslavery writings from the mid-1800s.

1. **Who is the Author?**
2. **What is the Date of the Source?**
3. **What is the Purpose of the piece?**
4. **What else would you like to know?**

1. *C. Brindenbaugh, 1952, Explain myths of the Colonial South, What else has he written?*

2.

3.

4.