

# Gathering Sources

Once students have formulated a dynamic research question, it's time for them to begin searching for useful sources. We can teach critical information skills during this gathering stage by helping them imagine the sources they will need, locate the best sources, and evaluate those sources appropriately.

Before students set to the task of compiling a source list, they'll first need to think about what sort of information they need, and imagine the types of sources that will provide it. If students are keeping an Inquiry Log, they can use it to write down what they already do and don't know at the start of their research. They can also describe the kinds of sources they think might give them what they need to fill in their knowledge gaps. Let's say students are about to research a question around the authority and limitations of the U.S. Supreme Court. Before diving into the project, they can consider what they may already understand: how the basic legal system works, for example. From there, they can think about what they don't yet know: how certain cases end up before the Supreme Court, for example, or how justices are selected. Then students can start to imagine what *type* of source material might provide the best definitions and illustrations that will help them build knowledge.

Once students have a general sense of the type of sources to look for, they can begin the process of locating them. It's important for students to remember that the sources they think they'll need in the beginning might not be the one that will prove the most helpful in the end. Part of inquiry-based research means being open to unexpected twists and turns in the road. Encourage students to cast a wide net during their early searching, and not feel hemmed in by any predictions they might have made earlier about the types of sources that will be most valuable. Major insights about the Supreme Court may come from reading biographies about the justices themselves, for example, rather than from textbooks about how the U.S. legal system functions. The best results often come from research that is open and explorative, rather than closed and directed.

Once students have a list of potential sources, they can begin the process of evaluating them. An important part of source literacy is looking at a source carefully to understand it: its purpose, scope, and structure. After that, students can assess the source's credibility. What makes them feel willing to trust the source? What makes it seem authoritative? Are there any potential biases in place? For their Supreme Court research project, students will likely find sources that offer a range of perspectives on court decisions. Separating scholarly analysis from the opinion page editorials, for example, will help students inform their own perspectives. Both source types may be useful in answering their research question but may be suited to different purposes.

Attention to these three aspects—imagining sources, locating sources, and evaluating those sources—will smooth students' path in answering their research question, as well as give them more confidence in the work they're putting into their project.

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