Types of Sources
There are different ways to categorize sources for research. I will focus on three different ways.

First, we can divide sources into scholarly, general interest, and reference.

Scholarly sources are written by experts for experts. The authors are scholars—people whose whole career is to study this subject. Scholarly sources are specialized reports, often highly technical, which are published in specialized journals read by other scholars. These journals have a system of peer review which requires an article to be read and approved by other experts before it can be published. Books can also be scholarly sources, if written by scholars in the field and peer reviewed, and are usually published by university presses. Scholarly sources almost always have extensive footnotes and references (not “Suggestions for Further Reading,” but a complete list of all works mentioned), and articles are often preceded by an abstract, or brief summary. Scholarly articles almost always either report on original research, or have a thesis, or both. Titles are usually quite specific and specialized. You will be required to use at least three (3) scholarly sources in your research. This means at least three must be cited in the body of your paper, used for evidence or argument—not just looked at but used.

General interest sources are written for a general readership by an author who may or may not be an expert in the field. They are not very technical, can be understood by someone who is not trained in the field, and appear in general interest publications of all kinds. These publications can actually be quite specialized in focus (e.g., Fishing and Hunting News, Seattle Bride) or very broad (Newsweek, Harpers). They might have a particular political slant (The Progressive, The Weekly Standard), or a particular demographic they’re trying to appeal to (Seventeen, Ebony). Newspapers are another type of general interest publication. Some of these publications use fact-checkers to check the accuracy of what they print; others rely on the editor’s judgment and trust in the reporter and his or her sources. (This can get them in trouble, if a reporter decides to make stuff up, or if a source is unreliable.) There are also general interest books, written either by a specialist in the field for a general audience, or by a writer who researches the topic, interviews experts, and explains it in non-technical terms.

Reference sources are dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanacs, certain government publications (e.g., the CIA’s World Fact Book) and other publications that provide straight factual information. They are usually considered reliable, especially on the basic facts (e.g., the dates of World War I). Many websites (e.g. webmd.com, etc.) also fall into this category. Reference sources are not counted as sources for your research. It’s ok to refer to them (hence the name) to get basic background information, and if you do you must cite them in your bibliography, but they do not count toward the eight required sources for your final research paper.

Another way to classify sources is as primary, secondary, and tertiary sources.

Primary sources are “original work such as firsthand reports of experiments, observations, or other research projects; field research you carry out yourself; and documents like letters, diaries, novels, poems, short stories, autobiographies, and journals” (Troyka, 507). Field research might include interviews, surveys and the like. Certain types of government documents can also be
primary sources—laws, court rulings, and policy documents; and such things as census data, labor figures, economic statistics and the like, which are firsthand reports of observations.

*Secondary sources* build on someone else’s work with primary sources. For example, a literary critic who analyzes a novel, a historian who has read someone’s diary and letters, or an economist who has analyzed Bureau of Labor Statistics data would all be secondary sources. Most *scholarly sources* are *secondary sources*.

I have no requirement regarding the number of primary or secondary sources you use. Some topics may lead you to use a lot of primary sources, while others may involve none at all.

*Tertiary sources* are such things as school textbooks, generic websites like “About.com” or Wikipedia, and standard reference works such as encyclopedias and dictionaries. They are neither primary sources, nor based on primary sources, but rather condense and compile the findings of secondary sources. They do not go deeply into the topic, and many are not of a high enough academic standard for this type of research.

Certain tertiary sources, such as standard reference works and high-level college textbooks, may be used, but they do not count toward the eight required sources. Other tertiary sources, such as lower-level textbooks and some generic websites, may not be used. See me to be sure a tertiary source is acceptable.

Finally, we can divide sources up between *print* and *electronic sources*.

*Print sources* are all sources that are printed on paper: books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and so on.

*Electronic sources* are sources in electronic form, including databases, e-journals, websites, and so on.

Many students are quite unaware of the wealth of information available to them in print, and many make the mistake of assuming that all information is available on the internet. Both are grave mistakes. For your research paper you will be required to use at least one print source. This is to ensure that you become at least somewhat familiar with resources besides websites and online journals, and the techniques for finding them. (Print sources may be scholarly sources, so you can use the same source to meet your minimum requirements in both categories.) Sources that originally appeared in print, but which you find in electronic form (such as PDF files) do not count as print sources for this requirement.

**A minimum of 8 sources will be required.** All eight sources must actually be used, which means they must be cited in the body of the paper as the source of some piece of information, idea or argument, not simply listed at the end.

**Works Cited**