

Introducing English Studies
Chapter 5: Screencast Transcript

Slide 1 [Title slide]

Hello. I am Tonya Krouse, co-author of the textbook *Introducing English Studies*, and in this screencast, I will talk about how to use rhetoric to evaluate scholarly sources.

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Topics we will cover today include:

1. The rhetorical situation of scholarly sources
2. Understanding audience
3. Assessing the credibility of the author
4. Judging the evidence
5. Considering emotional impact
6. Integrating scholarly sources into your own writing

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“The Rhetorical Situation,” a term coined by the Rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer, can basically be defined as the context that incites a speaker or writer to engage in persuasive speech. What is the rhetorical situation of scholarly books or articles? That question might surprise you because you think of scholarly sources as “objective,” but scholars have a purpose that drives their writing and although it might be authoritative, it is not neutral. So why do scholars write scholarly books or articles? They do so to:

- To create “new knowledge,” which basically means that they discover something that had not previously been understood or known about their topic of inquiry.
- To disseminate findings, results, discoveries, or interpretations.
- To participate in the existing scholarly conversation and influence the direction of that conversation about their topic.

For example, a scholar of literature might have discovered a lost work by a canonical author, might have arrived at a new interpretation of a literary work that other scholars have analyzed, or might want to respond to another scholar’s approach to a work of literature and add to the conversation by agreeing, debating, complicating, or objecting.

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Once we have looked at the rhetorical situation that incites scholarly conversation, we can then begin to understand the audience for the scholarly source. Who reads scholarly books or articles? In general, they target four groups of people.

Who reads scholarly articles or books?

- Other scholars with expertise about the topic, narrowly defined.
- Other scholars from the discipline, who may not have specialized expertise about the topic in question.
- Other scholars from other disciplines, whose work is adjacent to the topic.
- Students seeking to learn about the scholarly conversation about this topic.

As you can see from this list, the audience for scholarly sources tends to be narrow, and this might influence decisions the author of the scholarly source makes about what to include, what language to use, and what to leave out.

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Once we understand audience, we can assess the credibility of the author of the scholarly source. What tells me if a source can be trusted? To begin, we can uncover the following information about the author or authors of the source:

- Institutional affiliation
- Job title
- Other publications
- The number of times this author is cited by other scholars
- Training and experience

While some of this information will be available in the publication itself in the form of the author's biography, footnotes or endnotes, and author credit, you might also find it useful to do an internet search for the author to see if they have a website with their curriculum vitae or do a search in google scholar to discover how frequently this author is cited by other scholars. From there, you can discover whether your source is a recognized authority on their topic.

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Next, you can judge how the author uses evidence to support their claims.

What kinds of evidence should I expect to see in a scholarly source?

First, you can expect to see primary sources. Primary sources are the primary object of scholarly inquiry, and what counts as a primary source varies by scholarly discipline and question. Primary sources might include results of an experiment, statistical data, a painting, a film, or a work of literature, and many more.

Second, you should also see secondary sources. Secondary sources can include

- Scholarly, peer-reviewed books or articles
- Scholarly sources that are not peer-reviewed
 - Reference works like dictionaries, encyclopedias, or other specialized sources that give basic information about a topic

- Sources aimed at a popular or general audience, such as newspaper or magazine articles, TEDtalks, or documentaries

When you evaluate the evidence that the author of your source employs, you should think about whether the evidence supports the claims that the author is making, whether the evidence itself is authoritative, and how the evidence provided paints a picture of the scholarly conversation and what is at stake in this research.

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Finally, when using rhetoric to evaluate a scholarly source it is important to consider whether the source uses emotion to influence the reader.

- Scholarly sources may persuade using emotion, but this varies by discipline.
- Pathos, or the attempt to persuade through emotion, tends to have less value in scholarly conversations than ethos, appeals relying on the credibility of the author, or logos, appeals using evidence.

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Understanding the rhetoric of the sources that you use can help you to more effectively integrate sources into your own academic writing. Things you should always do when you yourself use scholarly sources include:

- Be sure to use a signal phrase to transition from your ideas to the ideas of your sources.
- Choose sources that have a high impact on the scholarly conversation you seek to enter.
- Use analysis and synthesis to bring what your sources have to say into conversation with your own ideas.
- Show that you value your sources by giving them proper credit in citations.

Taking the time to analyze your sources first can help you to do these things.