This handout provides guidance on how to select and evaluate research sources for graduate-level work. As you read through the sections below, it should become apparent that graduate-level sources are professional sources and there are guidelines that govern the word “professional.” In school, as in the workplace, only credible sources should be used, and this handout gives you guidance on how to determine the credibility of sources.

**Peer-Reviewed Sources**

*Peer review* is a professional term that means a panel of experts in a particular field has reviewed a publication submission and have either approved or denied the work submitted. *Peer-reviewed* or *refereed* journals are typically publications that publish articles in a particular field like elementary or secondary education, business subjects like accounting or management, and just about any other professional career. Generally, editors for these journals do not work on their own but in conjunction with a panel of reviewers; so, when someone sends in an article for publication, the editor distributes it to the panel. These reviewers generally must apply for such positions (even though many are not paid) because they have to demonstrate their expertise in this field. The reason they have to do this is because they are going to be judging others’ work, so they have to truly be experts.

The advantage of having a peer-reviewed source like a journal is that readers can generally count on the validity and accuracy of the articles that appear in the journal because of this peer-review process. The articles that are published have been reviewed by a panel of experts and not just one person, which means that there is consensus, usually, about the credibility of the information in the article and the author(s).

*What is the difference between a peer-reviewed journal and a scholarly journal?*

A peer-reviewed journal is often deemed a scholarly journal when the content is professional in nature and uses the peer-review process. Not all peer-reviewed journals are considered scholarly, though, because the definition of a scholarly publication is a publication that is written by and for scholars and experts in a field. Scholarly publications assume a certain level of education and background for its readers, while a peer-reviewed journal can be written for practitioners or even novices in a particular field (see Trade Journals below).

To determine if a journal is peer reviewed, you must look at the submission guidelines or Web site for the journal. Usually, this information is given freely so that authors know what to expect when they submit their work. Many of the journals listed in the results list from an online database search are peer-reviewed journals; however, do not take that for granted, but refer to the journal itself for confirmation.

When doing library searches, you can limit the results to just peer-reviewed or scholarly journals. Figure 1 shows an example of search results. Notice in the left navigation bar that there are options to check peer-reviewed journals and/or scholarly journals.
Examples of scholarly peer-reviewed journals include:

- *Technical Communication*
- *College English*
- *The Open Business Journal*
- *Accountancy Business and the Public Interest*
- *Harvard Business Review*
- *Journal of American History*

Books, whether print or online, are usually considered academic sources; some may be considered scholarly, but not all books fall into the scholarly category. Remember, it depends on the author, the audience, and the content. A book, however, may not even be considered an academic source for different reasons. For instance, maybe an author has some issue of credibility attached to his or her name or the content of the book is under review or even attack by other experts in the field. In those cases, the book may still be used, but you should be aware of the controversy surrounding the author and/or the content of the book so that when you use the information, you can be sure to address any counter-arguments a reader may have concerning your use of that source. As graduate students, you
also want to consider the audience for books you use in order to ensure the readers of your work will consider your sources academic, at the very least. For instance, it would probably be all right to use one of the “Dummies” books on how to put together some sort of legal document, for instance, but is there another official guide you can consult instead of one of those books? It’s not to say that it’s wrong to use one of those books; however, readers of academic and scholarly publications prefer to have their information come from experts or official documentation rather than sources written for the general public.

**Trade Journals**

Trade journals are similar to scholarly journals, except they are generally written for practitioners instead of academics. This difference in audience generally means trade journal articles are shorter, the language is not academic but rather work- or practice-oriented, and the content often contains articles of opinion and news rather than research. Trade journals are still considered academic sources because they generally have some sort of peer review or at least fact-checking prior to publication.

Some examples of trade journals include:

- *Intercom* (from the Society for Technical Communication)
- *Construction and Demolition Recycling*
- *Information Management Journal*
- *Journal of the Air and Waste Management Association*
- *The Academy of Management Journal*
- *Journal of Neuroscience Nursing*

**Government Documents**

Government documents are often used in graduate papers. The one thing to remember about using government documents as sources is that you should always be sure to retrieve the information from official government sites (.gov endings) and not secondary sites, especially .com sites.

**Blogs, Wikis, and Web Sites**

Blogs and wikis are generally not considered academic sources. The main reasons they are not considered academic sources are 1) they are not peer reviewed; 2) they often are based on opinion, especially blogs; and 3) they have a dynamic nature, which means the information on a blog or wiki on one given day may not be in the same format or even available on another day. Certainly, blogs and wikis are great sources for finding general information or for exploring a subject, especially when the blog or wiki contains links to other information; however, because of the three reasons stated above, they do not fall into the category of academic sources that should be cited in a graduate-level paper. This includes Wikipedia.

There are a number of blogs and wikis that are written by professionals and the content is written for a professional audience; therefore, they might have research-worthy information. If you run across a blog
or wiki like this, you should check with your advisor to determine if the content is worthy of using in your papers.

Web sites have the same issues as blogs and wikis when it comes to the three main reasons they should not be used; however, there are exceptions where some Web sites are given more credibility over other sites. For instance, .gov, .org, and .edu sites are given more credibility than .com sites. Commercial sites (.com) exist to sell a product or service; therefore, information on that site has been specifically selected to persuade readers to buy the service or product. While something may look official and even say it is a research study, if it resides on a .com site, then the source itself comes into question, so it should not be used.