

Part 8

You are going to read an article about the sources which university students can use for their essays. For questions **47–56**, choose from the sections (**A–D**). The sections may be chosen more than once. Mark your answers **on the separate answer sheet**.

In which section does the writer

ask about the specific details regarding a rule change?

47	
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bring the existence of a particular group into question?

48	
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mention a factor which has made a distinction less clear?

49	
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argue that it is useful to learn how to assess whether or not a source is valid?

50	
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mention weaknesses in an extract which can be exploited?

51	
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state that a particular custom leads to division and prejudice?

52	
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say that a change could increase students' confidence?

53	
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mention writers whose work is read by both academics and the public?

54	
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explore the choices available in a particular dilemma?

55	
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insist that she is not in favour of abandoning the current system?

56	
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Scholarly sources versus popular sources

*'There is an abundance of serious material outside academia, so why not use it?'
asks university professor Rachel Harvey*

- A** A student is researching scholarly material for her essay. She finds a quote she thinks she can use. It ticks all the boxes: original and insightful, persuasively argued, provocative, and with just enough holes that a good forensic analysis will have something to expose. There's one problem, however. It does not come from an academic paper, but from a blog written by an obscure amateur. It has, technically speaking, no academic credibility. By convention, students – and academics – are supposed only to engage in critical discussion with 'academically credible' sources. What, then, is the student to do? Pretend this precious nugget doesn't exist? A terrible waste. Plagiarise it (after all, who'll know)? Completely unethical. I'm not talking here about the sourcing of facts, or the fraught issue of truth and objectivity. I'm focusing on ideas, opinions and theories and my central argument is that we do our research a disservice if we automatically exclude a source because its provenance does not match certain outmoded criteria.
- B** The line between 'credible' and 'non-credible' sources is becoming ever more blurred, particularly in the era of electronic self-publishing. The internet has undoubtedly democratised the spread of ideas, weakening the assumption that university departments have some kind of monopoly on cogent, logical thinking. But if the line on permissible sources were to be moved, where should it be redrawn? If an official university department blog were deemed acceptable for students to cite, for instance, what about the personal blog of a leading professor or research student? What about publications by accredited and respected museums and galleries? And what of those whose published books and articles straddle the border between academia and general readership? Would their more popular works be considered less suitable for essay purposes than the less accessible ones? To take art theory as another example, where do we stand on those critics who write for a general readership? Is it acceptable to engage in argument only with well-established names?
- C** There are no easy answers, and I wouldn't dream of suggesting that we completely cast aside the challenging and rigorous in favour of the populist and amateur. Yet the assertion that only papers and books published by universities and their partners and associates are worthy of students' critical engagement does seem to foster a kind of academic protectionism which can't easily be justified. The convention of referring to academic writers exclusively by their surname and the publication date of their text is part of the problem. The effect is to create a kind of 'them and us' attitude, the idea of the grand academic being such a renowned authority on the topic that we don't even introduce them by their full name: they simply don't need one. So you've never heard of Jones (2003)? That's because you're just not on his/her intellectual plane. The surname-only principle implies that flimsiest of notions, the 'academic community', a kind of exclusive club for those who jealously guard rigorous debate and the exchange of ideas. Arguably, this 'club' has never been a real community in any meaningful sense.
- D** Far better to introduce academic writers by their full names, with a brief description of who they are, as we already do with sources from outside the so-called academic community. So Jones (2003) would be introduced as Pat Jones, senior lecturer in media studies at X University, in much the same way as we introduce, say, fashion blogger Tim Smith, jewellery designer Lena Thomas or film reviewer Mick Stuart. That way students could be actively encouraged to collate ideas and arguments from multitudinous sources from both inside and outside academia – and ultimately to decide for themselves which ones deserve closer scrutiny on the basis of intrinsic merit. It might even encourage them to become less timid about criticising theory in their own words, based on their own insights. Some will say this would lead to a horrendous free-for-all, where no distinction is made between learned discourse and undisciplined chattering. But sorting the valuable from the worthless and identifying bias, prejudice and sheer self-indulgence is always an intellectually exhilarating task that sharpens one's critical skills – wherever the debate is taking place.