

## Research: Internet vs. Library

An excellent history essay is grounded in impeccable research. The material you cite in your paper needs to be up to date and vetted by professional scholars to ensure accuracy. For well over two thousand years, scholars have turned to libraries, humanity's traditional preserve of knowledge, to aid them in their intellectual endeavors. However, in the last two decades, the rise of the Internet has presented scholars with new sources of information. The ease with which one can locate a vast array of data makes referencing material found on the Internet a tempting alternative to visiting the library. However, as you begin the process of researching an essay topic, you must beware of the sources from the Internet you choose to cite. The credibility of your research depends upon it.

There are numerous benefits to relying on libraries for research purposes. The information stored there is usually of the highest caliber, and librarians take great pains to ensure that the periodicals and books housed by them are top notch. Libraries often include material that you cannot access on the Internet, or at least cannot access for free. Moreover, libraries have addressed public demand for instant access to written materials. Many university libraries provide digital copies of academic works, including dozens of databases of online scholarly periodicals. Although these works are now online, they still hold up to the high standards demanded by academics. You can almost never go wrong by visiting your local or school library for information, even if that information is now online.

Of course, while providing access to an array of trustworthy sources, the Internet is fraught with a number of perils. Although websites can be useful in stoking your curiosity about any number of topics, and the information you can find is often up-to-the-minute, you should avoid citing most websites as factually reliable. Indeed, for every credible source on a given topic, you will come across ten with less than reputable credentials that appear under your search results. Consider an example from a class I once taught on Nazi Germany. The student chose to write about art during the Nazi period. As opposed to visiting the library, the student chose to rely largely on Internet sources. Inevitably, and much to the student's embarrassment, he accidentally cited a pro-Nazi website on art. Websites and their creators are exceptionally skilled at dressing up unsubstantiated opinion as empirical fact. Had the student taken the time to visit the university library, he would not have made this grave mistake. Even seemingly respectable websites, such as Wikipedia, often contain erroneous or incomplete information. If you must cite an Internet source, verify it with your professor or instructor. It may also help to try to track down the original resource that the website quotes or cites in order to verify the credibility of the information. Otherwise, stick to respected online academic websites, such as those of national museums, online archives, or universities, and leave the Internet surfing for your free time.