



CONSIDERING SOURCE TYPES

BEAM: Considering the Functions of Sources

While it's important to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, it's also important to consider how sources function in your writing. You may, for example, use a primary source to provide background information about your work. Or you may use a secondary source to provide context or to offer a counterargument. The categories below, devised by Columbia University's Joseph Bizup, are designed to give you another way of thinking and talking about how sources function within arguments.

We might think of sources as being divisible into four types:

- **background**
- **exhibit**
- **argument**
- **method**

For each of these, I'll provide an example that might be used for an English paper with the following thesis (on Jane Austen's *Emma*):

"Every time Emma insults Miss Bates, she is effectively distancing herself not only from the silly older woman but also from the threat of spinsterhood. It is not until Emma begins to move toward marriage that she can safely begin to show kindness to Miss Bates and her niece Jane Fairfax, and rebuild a relationship in which she is not perpetually trying to establish her difference."

BACKGROUND SOURCES – "Writers *rely on background*" (Bizup 76).

Background sources provide us with facts. They might provide context or evidence we use to support our arguments. *It is important to cite your background sources.*

Common background sources: biographies, histories, reference books, lab reports.

Example from *Emma* paper:

The increasing number of unmarried women became a site of national anxiety, and a popular subject in the press, which referred to them as "excess" or "surplus" women: by the 1860s some newspapers were going so far as to suggest "solutions" to the problem of "redundant" women (Jeffries 87).

EXHIBIT SOURCES – Writers “interpret or analyze exhibits” (Bizup 76).

Exhibit sources provide us with examples. They might be used to support our arguments, but they require some intervention from the writer before they’re immediately accepted as evidence from the reader.

Common exhibit sources: literary texts, images, narratives, data that require interpretation.

Example from *Emma* paper:

Emma’s desire to visit Jane Fairfax stems directly from her pleasure in their similarities:

. . . the resemblance of their present situations increas[ed] every other motive of good-will. It would be a secret satisfaction; but the consciousness of a similarity of prospect would certainly add to the interest with which she should attend to anything Jane might communicate. (Austen 115)

The “personal growth” she exhibits in paying Jane the proper attention is dependent upon her new position as an engaged woman relieved of the fear of spinsterhood.

ARGUMENT SOURCES – Writers “engage arguments” (Bizup 76).

Argument sources provide us (simply enough) with arguments. These may be arguments that we use to support our own case, or they may be arguments that we disagree with. The sources in your review of literature are generally argument sources.

Common argument sources: journal articles, academic books, newspaper or magazine articles

Example from *Emma* paper:

Other critics have noted the central role that Miss Banks plays in facilitating the crisis of the novel – when Emma insults her at the Box Hill picnic – and Emma’s eventual refashioning into a more ethical protagonist. Maaja Stewart, for example, argues that the insult “shocks Emma out of her self-indulgent posture, leads her to establish a selfless relationship not only with Miss Bates but also with Jane Fairfax, and forms a prelude to her recognition of the meaning of Self in relationship to the Other as her nature yields itself to love” (75). Yet we cannot neglect the threat of the spinster, in both provoking Emma’s unkindness and in allowing her repentance – Emma may well be “shock[ed]” into good behavior, but it is not until she is safe from a future of spinsterhood that

she can begin to rebuild the relationships she nearly destroyed with her careless cruelty.

METHOD SOURCES – Writers “follow methods” (Bizup 76).

Method sources are sometimes more difficult to identify. They inform the way that we approach our arguments, or serve as models for our own writing. Bizup writes that, “it is not unusual for writers to acknowledge their most important method sources only obliquely, by deftly dropping a recognizable name, using a particular terminology, or adopting a prose style or mode of exposition that affiliates them with a particular school of thought” (76).

Common method sources: theory, lab reports

Example from *Emma* essay:

To read Miss Bates as a threat who must be dealt with rather than an annoyance who may be ignored is to engage in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed “paranoid reading” – that is, looking within texts to find evidence of unjust social systems we already suspect are at play (5). Yet, as Sedgwick herself points out, such a reading also allows some space for reparation.

Sources:

Bizup, Joseph. “BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-Based Writing.” *Rhetoric Review* 27.1 (2008): 72-86. Print.

From Example:

Austen, Jane. *Emma*. 1818. Ed. Robert Spector. Bantam Critical Edition. New York: Bantam, 1969.

Jeffreys, Shelia. *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930*. London: Pandora Press, 1985.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is About You.” *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Ed. Sedgwick. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997. 1-37. Print.

Stewart, Maaja A. “The Fools in Austen’s *Emma*.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 41.1 (June, 1986): 72-86. Print.