

Understanding Source Use in Academic Writing

The distinction between “primary” and “secondary” sources, as useful as it may be in some fields, does not help us much as writers. The key thing for writers is what we *do* with sources. This is especially important because our uses of even a single source can change over the course of a paper! In other words, we need a vocabulary that allows us to categorize and discuss our sources not in terms of essence, but in terms of *function*. This handout introduces you to that **new vocabulary for categorizing sources** from Bizup (2008) and suggests how you might use it to **read academic texts, organize research, and revise your writing**.

Sources fulfill the following rhetorical functions in academic texts:

Background or Context	Sources that provide background or context for the writer’s argument. If background information is common knowledge, e.g., “Shakespeare wrote Hamlet,” or “Barack Obama was the 44 th president of the United States,” it will typically be presented without citations.
Exhibit, Evidence, or Example	Sources that a writer explicates, analyzes, or interprets for the reader; a writer’s “raw material” or data.
Argument, Analysis, or Assessment	Sources whose ideas the writer is refuting, affirming, appealing to, refining, using for support, or qualifying in some way—a scholarly source with whom the writer is “in conversation.”
Method or Theory	Sources (or schools of thought, e.g. Marxism, feminism) from which the writer takes a method of thought, a particular procedure, an organizing theory or perspective, or key terms; frequently uncited or indicated by name-dropping.

This vocabulary is easiest to understand when applied to concrete examples. On the following two pages, you will find a Political Science article annotated using the categories presented here.

Is Polarization a Myth?

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EXHIBIT – the authors *analyze* and *interpret* this data; this analysis forms the foundation for their argument.

This article uses data from the American National Election Studies and national exit polls to test Fiorina's assertion that ideological polarization in the American public is a myth. Fiorina argues that twenty-first-century Americans, like the midtwentieth-century Americans described by Converse, "are not very well-informed about politics, do not hold many of their views very strongly, and are not ideological" (2006, 19). However, our evidence indicates that since the 1970s, ideological polarization has increased dramatically among the mass public in the United States as well as among political elites. There are now large differences in outlook between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious voters and secular voters. These divisions are not confined to a small minority of activists—they involve a large segment of the public and the deepest divisions are found among the most interested, informed, and active citizens. Moreover, contrary to Fiorina's suggestion that polarization turns off voters and depresses turnout, our evidence indicates that polarization energizes the electorate and stimulates political participation.

ARGUMENT – the authors *refute* the assertions made in this source; the article's central argument is organized around this refutation.

"Americans are closely divided, but we are not deeply divided, and we are closely divided because many of us are ambivalent and uncertain, and consequently reluctant to make firm commitments to parties, politicians, or policies. We divide evenly in elections or sit them out entirely because we instinctively seek the center while the parties and candidates hang out on the extremes." (Fiorina 2006, xiii)

The extent of ideological thinking in the American electorate has been a subject of great interest to students of public opinion and voting behavior since the publication of Converse's seminal paper on "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (1964). Based on his analysis of data from the 1956 and 1960 American National Election Studies, Converse concluded that the sort of ideological thinking common among political elites was confined to a small minority of the American public. The vast majority of ordinary voters showed little evidence of using an ideological framework to evaluate political parties or presidential candidates and very limited understanding of basic ideological concepts such as liberalism and conservatism.

American politics and the American electorate have changed dramatically since the 1950s in ways that might lead one to expect an increase in the prevalence of ideological thinking in the public, as Converse himself has acknowledged (2006). One important

change has been a very substantial increase in the educational attainment of the electorate. In his original study, Converse found that education was a strong predictor of ideological sophistication: college-educated voters displayed much higher levels of ideological sophistication than grade school or high school-educated voters. Between 1956 and 2004, the proportion of NES respondents with only a grade-school education fell from 37% to 3% while the proportion with at least some college education rose from 19% to 61%. Based on this trend alone, one would expect a much larger proportion of today's voters to be capable of understanding and using ideological concepts.

Another development that might be expected to raise the level of ideological awareness among the public has been the growing intensity of ideological conflict among political elites in the United States. For several decades, Democratic officeholders, candidates, and activists have been moving to the left while Republican officeholders, candidates, and activists have been moving to the right. Conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans, who were common in American politics during the 1950s and 1960s, are now extremely rare. At the elite level, ideological differences between the parties are probably greater now than at any time in the past half century (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 2001; Stonecash, Brewer, and Marianai 2003).

BACKGROUND – the authors use these sources to *establish* necessary historical and social context for understanding their argument and the significance of their

There is widespread agreement among scholars concerning the growing importance of ideological divisions at the elite level in American politics. There is much less agreement, however, about the significance of these divisions at the mass level. Some studies have found evidence that growing elite polarization has led to an increase in ideological awareness and polarization among the public (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Hetherington, 2001; Layman and Carsey 2002). However, other scholars, most notably Morris Fiorina and his collaborators, have argued that when it comes to the political beliefs of the mass public, very little has changed since the 1950s.

In his popular and influential book, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina claims that Converse's portrait of the American electorate "still holds up pretty well." According to Fiorina, the ideological disputes that engage political elites and activists have little resonance among the American mass public: like their midtwentieth-century counterparts, ordinary twenty-first-century Americans "are not very well-informed about politics, do not hold many of their views very strongly, and are not ideological" (2006, 19).

The argument that polarization in America is almost entirely an elite phenomenon appears to be contradicted by a large body of research by political scientists on recent trends in American public opinion. While there have been relatively few studies directly addressing Fiorina's evidence and conclusions (Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Demerath 2005; Evans and Nunn 2005; Klinkner 2004; Klinkner and Hapanowicz 2005; Rosenthal 2005), a growing body of research indicates that political and cultural divisions within the American public have deepened considerably since the 1970s. These studies have found that the political beliefs of Democratic and Republican voters have become much more distinctive over the past 30 years (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998; Hetherington 2001; Jacobson 2004, 2005; Jelen and Wilcox 2003; Layman and Carsey 2002; Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003; White 2003), that political divisions within the public increasingly reflect differences in religious beliefs and practices (Layman 1997, 2001; Layman and Carmines 1997) as well as deep-seated psychological orientations (Jost 2006), and that ideological polarization among party elites is explained in part by ideological polarization among party supporters in the electorate (Jacobson 2000).

This article uses data from the American National Election Studies and national exit polls to test five major claims made by Fiorina and his collaborators

about polarization in the United States. This evidence indicates that while some claims by culture war proponents about deep political divisions among the public have been overstated, Fiorina systematically understates the significance of these divisions. Americans may not be heading to the barricades to do battle over abortion, gay marriage, and other emotionally charged issues as some have alleged (Hunter 1995), but there are large differences in outlook between Democrats and Republicans, between red state voters and blue state voters, and between religious voters and secular voters. These divisions are not confined to a small minority of elected officials and activists—they involve a large segment of the public and the deepest divisions are found among the most interested, informed, and active members of the public. Moreover, contrary to Fiorina's claim that polarization turns off voters and depresses turnout, we find that the intense polarization of the electorate over George W. Bush and his policies energized the electorate and contributed to a dramatic increase in voting and other forms of political participation in 2004.

Fiorina's Five Claims

1. *Moderation.* The broadest claim made by Fiorina and the one that underlies all of the others is that the American public is basically moderate—the public is closely divided but not deeply divided. Today as in the past, most Americans are ideological moderates, holding a mixture of liberal and conservative views on different issues. There has been no increase in ideological polarization among the public.
2. *Partisan Polarization.* While differences between Democratic and Republican identifiers on issues have increased, they are only slightly greater than in the past. Partisan polarization is largely an elite phenomenon—only a thin layer of elected officials and activists are truly polarized in their views.
3. *Geographical Polarization.* Cultural and political differences between red states and blue states are actually fairly small. The similarities between voters in these two sets of states are much more striking than the differences.
4. *Social Cleavages.* Divisions within the public based on social characteristics such as age, race, gender, and religious affiliation have been diminishing. While divisions based on religious beliefs and practices have increased, they remain modest and have not supplanted traditional economic

BACKGROUND – The authors use these sources to establish the current state of the scholarly debate on the topic of polarization.

ARGUMENT – the authors use these sources to affirm (or support) their claims about polarization in the US.

ARGUMENT – the authors use this source to qualify their argument.

ARGUMENT – the authors summarize this source's claims so as to refute them and argue for a different position.



→ Using BEAM as a reading strategy

Throughout our university careers, we face the daunting prospect of reading long, complex academic texts. In part, this writing can be so difficult to read because of academics' tendency to cite densely and reference frequently. While reading you might have found yourself wondering:

- *Do I need to have read all of these sources that are being cited to understand the article?*
- *Should I be looking up each reference and name drop?*
- *If I don't understand a reference or a key term, does that mean I won't understand the text?*

By identifying the function of each source in a difficult text—especially in the first few pages, where citations can be particularly dense—you can determine what you actually need to pay attention to so that you can home in on the author's main argument.

Here's how you might use BEAM to read better and more efficiently for your seminars:

1. Choose a paragraph where you have trouble understanding what the author is saying and/or where you are confused about her citations.
2. Identify each citation as a *background*, *exhibit*, *argument*, or *method/theory* source. It might be helpful to highlight citations according to their function, using different colors for each function.
3. Reflect on how the author is using her sources, in particular the *argument* and *method/theory* sources, to construct their own arguments. Is the author in agreement or disagreement with the argument source(s)? How does this agreement/disagreement/complication contribute to or clarify the author's purpose or claims?
4. Now that you have identified how an author is using her sources, you will be able to prioritize the information coming from citations according to their function to the author's central argument. Here's a quick list:

A source **establishes a foundational premise** of the author's argument.

⇒ **Pay attention** to this citation and make sure you fully understand it!

A source establishes an argument's **key terms**.

⇒ **Pay attention** to this citation and make sure you understand this term!

A source **establishes why an article's research is significant** to its field.

⇒ This may be important if you are writing a summary of the article or a literature review, but otherwise,

this is **not as important for understanding** the article's arguments.

→ Using BEAM to direct your research

Do you have an exhibit source? Find argument sources!

Do you have argument sources? Find an exhibit!

→ Using BEAM to organize your research

BEAM can also help you make the leap from the research phase to the writing phase of your process. After reading a scholarly source, reflect on how you might use it in your paper:

- Will it serve as background, an argument to use/disagree with, or will you borrow key terms or a theory/method from it?
- If you've decided to use a source argumentatively, specify *how*: will this source support your argument, serve as a counterargument, or complicate your argument in some way?
- You can collect this information systematically in the research phase by writing an annotated bibliography.

→ Using BEAM to direct your drafting and revision process

Once you've written a draft, you might analyze your own citations using BEAM categories to access your text from a reader's perspective. It's important for readers to know *why* a source is cited by an author; that is, what role a source is playing in the text and how it relates to the author's arguments. To do this:

- Highlight all of your citations.
- Categorize how you are using each source (B, E, A, or M).
- Evaluate how you have integrated each citation: have you made explicit the function of each of your quotations/references to your own argument?
- If not, re-write your lead-ins to quotations and references so that this relationship is explicit. For specific guidance on quoting, see our handout on [integrating quotations](#).

Works Cited:

Bizup, Joseph: "A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-based Writing." Rhetoric Review vol. 27, no. 1 (2008), pp.72-86.

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