Sources as “Seeds”: Using a Reference List to Find More Sources

An academic publication usually ends with a list of references (also known as a bibliography or a works cited page). Reference lists can be powerful tools for locating more sources on a topic. By finding one relevant source and then locating several sources that it cites (and that are relevant to your topic), you can locate sources you might not otherwise find through a database, catalog, or Internet search.

Examining the references in an academic publication can also help you understand how different researchers have approached a topic and have related their work to that of others. Having this perspective can help you relate your ideas to those of others and make compelling arguments.

Activity:
1. Identify one source that is highly relevant to your research topic. (This may be a reading from class, or something you’ve located through a database or another research tool.)

2. Review the citations listed in the source’s reference list (usually located at the end of the document). Identify at least one source that seems relevant to your research topic.

3. Within the body of the source you are examining, locate where the author mentions the referenced item(s) within the body of the publication. Describe how the author uses the source (for example, to provide background information on a certain topic, to support an argument, etc.). Be as specific as possible about how the referenced source serves the author’s purpose. (Or if you think the referenced source is not useful to the author, explain why not.)

4. In 1-2 sentences, articulate how the referenced source(s) might help you develop your research topic.

5. Now that you’ve identified a potentially useful source, locate the item. These research tips can help:
   - For articles: OneSearch@IU (libraries.iub.edu/onesearch), which searches most of the Libraries’ databases at once.
   - For books: The Libraries’ catalog: iucat.iu.edu (Limiting to a title search is usually easiest.)
   - For articles printed in books: Search the Libraries’ catalog (iucat.iu.edu) for the title of the book in which the article appears.
   - Have questions? Librarians can help!
     o In person: Reference desk (Information Commons, Wells Library 1st floor)
     o Instant message (From the Libraries’ homepage – libraries.iub.edu – click on “Ask a Librarian.”)
     o Email: libref@indiana.edu

6. Once you’ve found the source, evaluate its relevance. (An article usually has an abstract, or summary, that can help with this. In a book, a jacket description, table of contents, index, or introduction can provide a quick overview.)

When evaluating the source, consider:
   - Will this source be helpful for your research? How (not)?
   - Does this source’s list of references tell you more about how this topic has been discussed by others? Does the list of references provide additional avenues for further investigation?