

## Show What You Know: Trusting Yourself as a Credible Source

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When working on a project of any kind, writers are often worried about finding just the right source to make their project magically come together. In this article, Brittany Larsen explores how that source could be you all along. Through fan fiction, she explains her process of gaining control of her own writing and finding her voice.

The blank page is always the hardest part of any writing project.

I realize this is already starting out as a cliché, but, for me, it's the truth. There's something intimidating about looking at the blank page and knowing that, starting with absolutely nothing, you have to say something that's relevant and interesting, while also demonstrating that you know what other people have already said about the topic along with backing up your information with credible sources so people know that you're telling the truth. All this researching makes you wonder if your voice even matters in the conversation. Because you can only have something worth listening to once you have a PhD, right?

Wrong.

What I'm saying might sound different from what you've learned up until now about what makes "real" writers, but I'm here to say that you, a writer, have something to say. And it matters. Until you acknowledge this fact, no amount of professor help or writing workshops or peer editing is going to help the true problem of staring down that awful blank page (or screen, or what have you).

The idea for this article started percolating during my last year of undergrad, when I was talking to one of my classmates. The conversation went something like this:

“Hey, have you started writing the draft that’s due for tomorrow?”

“No. I’m still researching everything. I have to find all my sources before I decide what I’m going to say.”

“. . . Really?”

“Yeah. What do you do?”

I recognize that different people have different processes, but, when I start a writing project, sources tend to stress me out to the point where I can’t even start writing. Instead, I decide what I want to say, do a cursory glance through what kind of articles are out there on the subject, and then start writing. I get a few hundred words in before realizing I haven’t used a source yet and that I probably should soon. This was worrying in itself, but it wasn’t what worried me that day. Instead, what worried me was the idea that I saw my classmates being more stressed about finding sources than they were about developing their ideas. On the flip side, I also recognized that my complete disdain for sources was coming partially from a fear that sources would overtake my work and it wouldn’t be mine anymore. Both attitudes regarding sources were harmful.

When I asked my classmates why they didn’t just start writing and look for sources later, they said, roughly, that people would care more about what their sources said than what they had to say. This made me start to think about my own process and why it was the opposite of what I saw other people doing. And I’ve eventually come to realize that it probably comes from a place you wouldn’t expect: my twelve or so years in the fanfiction community. My time writing in this style led me to a wonky sense of information ownership and a belief that I have a right to question what the perceived “owner” of information has to say. Freeing myself from these constraints hasn’t made beginning that source-based writing project any less daunting, but it has kept me out of the unshakable research loop, searching for That Perfect Source that will write the paper for me. It’s taught me that my thoughts matter and that I don’t have to have my doctorate to say something worth listening to.

Before we get started, I want to dispel two misperceptions you might have from this introduction. First, I’m not saying that sources aren’t important. Knowing what other people have said about a topic and using that information as a building block for your own argument is an important

part of writing. But, for the purposes of an argument-based piece of writing, that's what they are: back up. You're the star. And, while sources are great, what I'm suggesting is that you are allowed to question them. If you disagree with a point that a researcher is suggesting, that's fine! Your own experience can enable you to sometimes say, "I know more than you" and illustrate how.

Second, I'm not suggesting that everyone should follow my "sources last" model. If your process leads you to gather information first before developing your ideas, do what works for you. What I am suggesting is that feeling like you are required to seek out information from others before your writing has any validity is a myth that I want to eradicate. And, in keeping with my purpose, if you get to the end of the article and think I'm full of it, that's valid. My feelings won't be hurt.

## Defining Agency

To start off, I think we should have a conversation about the word agency. **Agency**, as I'm going to refer to it, is an author's feeling of ownership over their writing. It's that feeling I get when I write something and feel like I did more than just repeat what other people said. For example, picture yourself writing a text message to one of your friends. Typically, it's a pretty low-pressure situation: trying to convey information about your day, making plans, or just checking in. In these situations, it would be considered pretty ridiculous to have formalized citations included. We believe what our friends tell us, because in these conversations, we hold power over our own information. If we give our friends a piece of news and they ask, "What? Where did you hear that?", we will give our source, but the way we use our source and the conclusions we draw from it are still our own. Information is passed naturally between people all the time, yet, in casual conversation, we don't place ownership on any one person.

So why does this natural understanding about the sharing of information suddenly change once we're in an academic situation? In my experience, it was a mixture of inexperience and feeling like I didn't have the power to question the way I had been told to write in the past that changed how I felt about sharing information. My professors sometimes required a certain number of sources, and I felt like, in order to get a good grade, they were more interested in how many other people's thoughts I included than in anything I might have experienced. Now, I realize my viewpoint may have been limited, but the effects it had on how I viewed writing were real. In short, I did not see myself as a source but rather a vessel through which to rehash information.

Suddenly in my senior year, however, something changed. I realized that, alarmingly soon, I was going to have to go out there and be a professional in my field. In a very short time, I was about to become a source for other people, and I felt totally unprepared. So I tried something weird: I decided to write about fan fiction, which is something I know a lot about. I felt pretty qualified to do so, since I had been in the community for eleven years, and I was pretty excited. Finally, I was going to get to do something original and relevant and all of the things that college promised me I could do.

But something strange happened. As I wrote out my experience, I found that, even though I knew what I was saying was true, I felt the need to qualify what I was saying with sources. Knowledge I had just from having experience in the field was, I feared, not going to be taken seriously because I was saying it and not someone with a fancy degree. When I talked to people in my class about my research topic, though, they believed me. The only source they needed was my saying, “I’ve done this for eleven years.” After that, I didn’t feel like I needed an expert to validate what I knew to be true from my antecedent knowledge.

Now, you might not be an expert in fan fiction, but I’m sure there’s something in your life that you know more about than others. Maybe it’s video games. Maybe it’s soccer. Maybe you had to go to a physical therapist and that led you to pursuing a career in physical therapy. Whatever your thing is, I’m willing to bet it’s your personal experience that built up your knowledge. So, how do we go about trusting and using that personal experience as a valuable source in our writing?

## **Antecedent Knowledge**

The idea that your past experiences shape you is called antecedent knowledge. **Antecedent knowledge**, according to the ISU Writing Program website, is “all the things a writer already knows that can come into play when a writer takes up any kind of writing” (“Antecedent Knowledge”). So, as I understand it, antecedent knowledge is all of that personal experience that you bring with you into other aspects of your life. For example, if you wrote a lot of assignments in high school that were in the five-paragraph-essay format (an intro, three body paragraphs and a conclusion), you may use that as the starting point for future projects. Antecedent knowledge isn’t bad or good: it’s just a fact that our past experiences influence future actions. Whether this fact is acknowledged is a different story, though. This was frustrating to me because I felt like teachers wanted me to write about things I cared

about, but they weren't asking for my stories. They were asking for facts I got somewhere else. Now that I've taught a few classes myself, I understand the purpose a little differently, but I still wish that the purpose of sources had been discussed more in-depth because the disconnect I felt kept me from connecting with my schoolwork a lot of the time. But maybe I wouldn't have felt as disconnected at all if I had just been taught to acknowledge that my past experiences affect my writing and are, in themselves, a source.

The idea that had been drilled into my head throughout my schooling told me that any piece of information that I used in my writing that wasn't common knowledge needed a source. But that becomes tricky because whose common knowledge are we talking about? Citing a source for a lot of my knowledge of the fan fiction community, for example, required me to know where I learned that information, and I didn't have an answer to that question. I simply learned what words like "canon," "headcanon," and "OTP" meant through spending time in the community. This culture of sharing information through a community and sharing ownership of the community knowledge didn't translate well into the school version of finding a source. Therefore, in the traditional model I had been taught, I didn't see a place for my antecedent knowledge. As I've worked through the process of writing this article, though, I've seen how changing our perception of sources and how they work can turn antecedent knowledge into a strength. Even in an academic setting, there may be opportunities to see yourself as an authority on subjects you have community knowledge about.

On that note, different genres are going to require different types of sources. And that's where the real fun begins because this idea of seeing yourself as an authority figure can still work, even when you need outside sources. When you need to use sources, the key to remember is that other people's arguments can help inform yours, just as your ideas can shed new light on theirs. In other words, when you're stuck, try thinking about your personal experience. You can always go back and add a source later if it doesn't work. For example, I used the ISU writing definition of antecedent knowledge because, while I'm using the term in a specific way, I think my way of explaining it wouldn't be clear without a more technical definition. But I didn't just let that definition sit there. I used it for my purposes and made it work for my argument.

With that in mind, I want to show how my antecedent knowledge affected my writing in surprising ways and how activities that I do for fun and never thought would enter into my school life actually ended up having the biggest impact on my writing.

## My Story

So, where does fan fiction tie into this? It ties back to my antecedent knowledge because I have been reading and writing fan fiction since I was twelve years old. Fan fiction is a type of writing where fans of a certain piece of media decide to tell their own versions of the story outside of the “canon,” or the actual source text. Fan fiction has an interesting public perception, with most people hearing about it and thinking, “Oh, like *Fifty Shades of Gray*,” which is *Twilight* fanfiction that was modified. In my experience, while there’s plenty of that, it can be so much more. For me, getting into fan fiction was about believing that there was more to the story than what the creators were creating. Fan fiction exists as a space where the story can extend off the page. What’s more, though, is that fan fiction exists as a space where people openly and freely disagreed with the creators, the “owners” of that text.

Admittedly, the implications of this did not occur to me when I was twelve and writing bad *Twilight* fanfiction of my own. As I came back to writing fan fiction when I was about twenty-one after a three-year break, though, I started to think more critically about what I was doing when performing that act of writing. Over time, attitudes about ownership and the role of fans shifted quite a bit. When I started writing, every piece had a disclaimer at the beginning, stating that the author was not the owner of the piece, that they were just writing for fun, and that they meant no disrespect to the author.

Over time, though, things changed. Somewhere along the way, a few authors started engaging with their fans more and “welcoming their fans to play in their sandbox” (“Playing in Someone Else’s Sandbox”). This is a phrase in the community that basically means that fiction is supposed to be fun, like kids playing in a sandbox. Some people are going to make sand castles, others are going to dig holes, and others are just there to throw sand around. But none of those kids are doing it wrong. So, in this vein, some authors decided that it wasn’t fair to keep all the sand to themselves. Instead, they wanted to let fans in to do what they wanted with the worlds and characters they created. In essence, then, they were acknowledging that the stories they created, the knowledge that they created, did not and could not belong only to them.

Once the information was out there, they couldn’t really control what people did with it, though some authors tried, by suing fan fiction writers if they wrote about their characters in a way they didn’t agree with. Now, because of a lot of work by the Organization of Transformative Works and the changing attitudes of these authors, the need for disclaimers has gone away and the field has a general understanding that we all know the writers

of fan fiction don't own the work they're writing about and that they're not making any money off of the endeavor.

At this point, you're probably saying, "That's nice, but what does it have to do with my writing in school?" And that is an excellent question. Therefore, I'm going to try to provide some connections by sharing some of the ways my journey through fanfiction has directly affected my academic writing. So, let's start at the beginning. I wrote my first fan fiction when I was thirteen. It was cowritten, which is pretty common in fan fiction since the fandom world is such a collaborative space. Interestingly, the academic world can sometimes also be a collaborative writing space. Take a look at some of the articles you have to read for school and take note of how many of them are coauthored. Writing with someone else helped me to develop my ideas and to learn how to work with people. We had to balance our writing styles and our different visions for the story. Ultimately, that collaborative nature is what I think has stuck with me the most from this time.

Collaboration is important when considering sources because that attitude helped me see writing as an ongoing conversation, instead of separate pieces that exist apart from each other. Basically, when you write something that involves sources, whether it's a paper, a lab report, or a Facebook post, you're entering into a conversation. People are going to interact with what you're saying after you've written something and while you're writing it. Your sources are your interaction with those texts that started the conversation before you. That doesn't mean that points made later in the conversation are any less worthy—it just means that you have to show you were listening.

I wrote in the old model of disclaimers and such from the time I was thirteen until I was eighteen, before taking a break when I started college. When I came back at twenty-one, disclaimers had all but gone away, and I found myself feeling more free to write in ways that directly criticized, contradicted, or ignored original creators' work. For example, a creator could say, "This character hates this other character," and fan fiction writers step in to say, "But what if they didn't?" It's a basic example, but I think it makes the point. Fan fiction writers stepped in to fill the gaps left by creators, just as we step in in school to fill in gaps that academics leave.

Over time, I've left and come back to fan fiction, moved between fandoms, taken on different roles in the community (writer, beta, friend), but collaboration is the skill that keeps coming back. Fandom, like any writing, is an ongoing conversation that keeps the source text alive. With that in mind, how does one go about writing something with this view of sources? Fear not. Let's look at my process to see one example of how to consciously think about entering into an ongoing conversation through writing.

## My Process

First, I want to write a disclaimer of my own. The takeaway here is not, “Sources don’t matter, and I can write down other people’s words with no consequence because information belongs to everybody.” This isn’t tolerated even in fan fiction, and there are social (and occasionally legal) penalties for passing off someone else’s words as yours. Instead, what I want to emphasize is that, while the sources own the specific words used, the ideas and concepts expressed are not “owned” by any one person. They’re shared among a community, a community you become part of by sharing in a conversation with those sources. When you start to look at your role in creating research as joining a conversation instead of as intruding on a conversation that is already happening, a world of possibilities opens up where your voice can say something valuable, instead of just being used to parrot what others have already said. It’s the only way new knowledge is created.

While I’m not going to pretend that my process works for everyone, I want to model how I go about writing, while acknowledging how it’s limited to an English Studies mindset, so that you can get an understanding of one way the ideas that I’m proposing work in practice. I suppose you could deem it an argument-first methodology, rather than a source-first one.

When I set about completing a writing project where I know I’m going to need sources, I start by picking a topic and sifting through what I know about the topic and sitting with it for a day or so while I generate what I think I want to say. I do this instead of starting with outside research because I want to avoid the research loop, where I get so caught up and stuck in looking up what other people have said on a topic that I don’t think about what I’m trying to get across. Then, once I have a good idea of what I want to say, I look up sources to see what kinds of things have already been written in the realm of my topic. From there, I read the abstracts and write down the names of articles I think will be relevant, but, against common practice, I don’t read them right away. I worry if I do, I’ll get too caught up in repeating the information from the articles, and my paper won’t enter into my argument organically. I’ll be too busy trying to get out all of the information I learned, and, from there, it feels like it’s already too late.

Instead, I do something that at first was pretty scary: I just start writing, without thinking about the sources. I acknowledge that owning your writing in this way is scary. It’s hard to have to put ideas out there that are yours and accept that someone is going to read it and that what you say is going to reflect on you. In that way, it’s easy to let sources do the speaking for you and, therefore, avoid the judgement that comes with putting your words out



there. But I also found that when I started writing, at least at first, without worrying about needing to include sources, it was also really freeing and helped me find what I actually wanted to say. And from there, I was able to see more clearly where the sources were actually needed and would actually fit into my argument. In short, by at first not using sources, I actually found myself using more sources. I just used them more effectively, instead of just throwing quotes in to fit some imaginary quota.

A word of caution: writing is complicated and messy, so this is not a how-to article. I'm not saying, "Do what I do and your writing problems will go away forever!" This model may not work at all for you, and even for me, there are genres where this mode of thinking doesn't work. However, especially if you are like me and get stuck when beginning a project, it's one method among many that could help to experiment with.

## The Takeaway

So, let's put this all into perspective. Do I expect everyone who reads this article to be inspired and take up my process as their own? Of course not. However, even if you're not on board with making the total switch to source-last thinking, or the type of writing you're doing doesn't really fit with this model, I still think there are some important points you can take away from this article. First, your antecedent knowledge matters. Your personal experience is a source in and of itself, and, when used strategically, it can be a scholarly source. Second, research is an ongoing process throughout a project. Source-first thinking implies that you're going to have all your information completely in order before you start a project, which often isn't true. In some cases, you can use your antecedent knowledge to show you the gaps in your thinking where a source might be needed.

With these ideas in mind, I hope I've at least helped you think about your relationship with sources. You have something to say. Now, just stand up and say it.

## Works Cited

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