SOURCE FUNCTIONS ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

Sources may be used...

- **As a primary focus of analysis**. The writer sets out to interpret, assess, and/or complicate a source or set of sources. This use of a source is sometimes called "close textual analysis" or "close reading." Close reading of a symbolic representation typically results in an interpretation, while one of an argumentative text typically results in either an interpretation or a critique.
  - o Example from an American Studies paper on the Robert Gould Shaw memorial commemorating a white Civil War commander and his black troops: *The murkiness of the relationship between whites and blacks is clearly reflected in the structure of the monument. Shaw is certainly the prominent figure—he and his horse are almost detached from the bronze background—while the black soldiers are in much shallower relief.*

- **To establish the status quo**—the standard opinion(s) on a topic, the standard way in which a problem is approached, or the current state of knowledge in the field. The writer establishes the status quo, usually in the introduction, to set up a paper that's positioned against the status quo.
  - o Example from a biology paper on speciation by sexual selection: *Scientists have explained Haldane's rule for inviability, or sterility, by offering genetic explanations, the most notable being Muller's dominance hypothesis (1940). Recently, Wu and David (1993) have offered a new explanation, known as the "faster male" theory, which centers on male-specific sterility traits evolving at a faster rate than female-specific ones. This theory has been substantiated by several independent studies (True et al., 1996; Turelli, 1998). Yet, as will be seen, some important objections can be raised against the faster male theory and ultimately against role of sexual selection in sterility.*

- **To establish a problem or question worth addressing**. The writer presents a problem, question, or dilemma (usually in the introduction) that the sources highlight in some way because they disagree with one another, the writer disagrees with them, they illuminate a heretofore murky matter, the information they present is conflicting, and so on.
  - o From a history of science paper on John Huston's film *Let There Be Light*, a World War II documentary about soldiers treated for battle fatigue: *Many historians and psychiatrists have observed psychiatry's remarkable changes during the war, but often they present its emergence as a seamless transition in which psychiatry arrives as the "Cinderella" of the evening in the 1950s (Menninger 1991). Alternatively, histories which examine the more complicated expansion of psychiatry do so only from the inside—by looking at the internal changes of the discipline (Grob 1991; Hale 1995). An examination of* Let There Be Light *allows us to see the popularization of American psychiatry in the mid-20th century more accurately, as an outgrowth of its dynamic relationship to the government and role in the war effort.*

- **To supply context or background information**. The writer uses sources to explain what readers need to understand, usually about a time or culture, to follow the paper. In other words, the sources help the writer build a context for a discussion.
  - From an economics paper on the post-Cold War viability of NATO: *Created in 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was a military alliance composed initially of 21 nations, including the United States, Great Britain, France, and Belgium. Officially, NATO "embodies the transatlantic partnership between European members of NATO and the United States and Canada" and was "designed to bring about peace and stability throughout Europe" (NATO).... Directly after the fall of the Soviet Union, however, NATO began an eastward expansion to include former Soviet satellite countries. This move, we may infer, was designed to ensure the Organization's relevance in the post-Cold War world.*

- **To provide key terms or concepts**. The writer borrows a term or concept (perhaps qualifying, refining, or adding to it) and uses it to illuminate the topic at hand.
  - From a literature paper on race and class in Toni Morrison's novel Song of Solomon: *In his essay "On Being Black and Middle Class," Shelby Steele describes the conflict between the two aspects of a middle-class black man's identity as a "double bind" in which his race and class are "a threat to one another" (42). Macon Dead and his son, Milkman, both economically prosperous black men, find themselves caught in the double bind that Steele describes. But instead of strongly agreeing with Steele's assertion of the importance of individual ownership and middle-class values (Steele 47), Morrison presents a more ambiguous view: subscribing to middle class values under certain conditions, she also suggests the importance of abandoning some of those values.*

  - **To occasion a "face-off" with another opinion or interpretation**. The writer presents a commentator's opinion or interpretation to dismiss it (when the view differs from the writer's own), refine it (when the view is useful but incomplete or partially mistaken), or build on it (when the view is in agreement with the writer's, and the writer can harness it to make a point). N.B.: This source function is rare in the natural sciences.
    - From an art history paper on Monet's *The Gare Saint-Lazare: Arrival of a Train* (1877): *These complex subjects contradict Zola's assertion that "the task [the Impressionist] undertakes is not that of representing a particular thought or historical act" (425). The subject matter in* Arrival of a Train *does indeed represent a titanic historical conflict. It pits the modern world of the Industrial Revolution against the traditional world of old French Catholicism.*