

Analyzing Newspaper Articles

News articles are typically written in the so-called inverted pyramid style, most important information at the beginning of the article and increasingly less important details toward the end of the article. If structured this way, an article can be edited from the bottom up to make room for additional news items that might have since broken. The aim of most news articles is to answer six questions about the happenings about which they report:

Who
 What
 When
 Where
 Why
 How



While newspaper articles are not typically the first choices for inclusion in academic research papers for their analytical content, they do provide first-hand accounts of events that have historical significance and are excellent examples of primary sources.

Of course, articles from newspapers might also serve other purposes in academic research. One prime example would be as support for a paper analyzing editorial styles of various national newspapers or news syndicates. A researcher might also be able to assess the leaning of the newspaper by reading the editorial page. Is the paper conservative? Is the paper liberal? Or is the paper more middle-of-the-road? Having a sense of the inclination of the paper's editorial staff might be useful in assessing how a particular situation is analyzed in an editorial. A researcher relying on editorial commentary on a particular situation would want to be aware of any inherent bias in the commentary as a means for gauging the accuracy of the allegations made in the editorial.

Some examples of research that might easily depend on articles from newspapers include:

- Contemporary reporting of the Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba in 1961.
- Contemporary accounts of the sinking of the Battleship Maine in Havana harbor in 1898.
- The capture and killing of Libya's Gadhafi in October 2011.
- Public sentiment toward the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States.
- Conservative and liberal analyses of NATO's intervention in Bosnia in 1995.
- Changes in cigarette advertisements in national newspapers of the United States from the early 1900s up to today.
- Excerpts of Lincoln's November 19, 1863, Gettysburg address published at the time of its delivery with editorial commentary of the time.

There are many other potential topics for which newspaper articles can serve as valuable sources and certainly scientific and technological breakthroughs will be reported in newspapers. Of more importance to a researcher keeping track of advances in science and technology would be announcements of where the breakthroughs were made and by whom. Finding the scientific literature surrounding the breakthrough would be the next step for the academic researcher.

Where and How to Find Newspaper Articles

Most libraries now provide access to articles from newspapers via online databases. A couple of the most commonly available systems that can provide worldwide access to newspapers are *NewsBank*, *ProQuest*, and *Lexis-Nexis*. A number of databases that provide access to magazine and journal articles also include newspapers in their coverage. For example, *Academic OneFile*, in addition to having articles from a wide variety of magazines and journals, also provides access to the full text of numerous newspapers. Most of these online systems are limited in the dates covered, frequently providing access from the late 1990s forward. A number of database vendors, however, are busily scanning older publications and making their articles available online through libraries. An example is the *Early American Newspapers* collection marketed by *NewsBank/Readex*. This collection covers newspapers published in the United States from around 1730 up through the 1920s. Not all libraries will have access to this collection.

Archives of some national caliber newspapers like the *Times of London* and the *New York Times* will be available in many libraries on microfilm. Both of these newspapers have their own printed indexes and even offer online search and retrieval for a fee. Many libraries will also likely house microfilm of important local papers as well.

Google is busily scanning newspapers and making them searchable and viewable over the open Internet. A researcher can go to news.google.com to access news articles available through Google. While it features currently available content online, once a researcher does a search of the news for a historical topic, Google will provide date ranges to which the search can be limited, in many cases helping the researcher locate copies of articles as early as the 19th century. For example, a quick search on U.S. President William McKinley results in articles as far back as 1869, the year that he was elected president.

What to keep track of to adequately cite a newspaper article.

- Article headline
- Article byline
- Newspaper name (and place of publication if it has a common title)
- Date of the newspaper
- Page and column of the article
- Where the article was retrieved (in print, from a database, online, etc.)
- When the article was retrieved (this is especially important if the article was found on the open Internet)

Reading by Jim Alderman. Updated March 2014.