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ADVICE

### The Myth of One More Source

Are you searching for more sources out of curiosity or fear?

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KEVIN DOOLEY, [CREATIVE COMMONS](#)

As you make yet another pass through the literature of your field, you tell yourself that you are just being thorough. You are looking for the elusive article that will give you — finally! — the information you need to start writing. That ever-expanding assemblage of citations is a testament to your diligence as a scholar, isn't it? Or is it evidence that you have succumbed to the myth of “one more source”?

It's a myth that keeps you feeling focused and productive. After all, broadening your literature search suggests that you are willing to dig deep and wide for every possible insight. But extensive background reading is only part of what it takes to be a good scholar. The goal is to learn from the literature, not drown in it.

A fruitful review of relevant scholarship grounds, focuses, and orients your own research. The trouble comes when gathering more and more citations has turned into an excuse to avoid the scary, challenging process of scholarly writing.

So ask yourself, Are you searching for more sources out of curiosity or fear?

- **If it's curiosity:** You enjoy the hunt. You are learning new terms and finding new perspectives — augmenting your understanding of your corner of the field, figuring out how it is defined and categorized, and identifying the major landmarks. You are increasingly conversant with relevant concepts and claims, which are forming now-recognizable patterns. As this happens, you should feel an eagerness (mixed with trepidation, of course) to add your own insights to the mix.
- **If it's fear:** You have accumulated a large number of citations, but they don't change your general understanding. You collect multiple versions of similar studies, which offer additional examples of familiar concepts, done by the same set of scholars using expected methods, based in the literature you have already found. You don't have a sense of surprise, or delight, and you're not sure what insights, if any, you might want to add. So you keep searching for imaginary missing citations that will help you figure that out, and get you started.

As a writing coach, I work with academics who have become stalled in their writing. Often, I find, fear is feeding certain myths that prevent them from making progress. I explore those myths (and how to recognize them and respond) in my new book, [Write No Matter What: Advice for Academics](#). Here I'd like to focus on the one-more-source myth.

That myth is fed by a fear of not knowing enough, of not feeling smart enough or skilled enough, to actually do your project. But becoming a scholar is an ongoing, perpetual process of staying informed, finding out

what you need to know to do good work. That is the purpose of graduate training, mentors, colleagues, and peer reviews. Your job is not to already know everything. It is to learn enough to be able to recognize and do good work. That is how you make a contribution to the ongoing, incomplete, exploratory scholarly process.

So how can you move out of fear, and into productive academic writing?

- **Recognize and befriend the writing myth that has you in its grip.** In the one-more-source case, it feels safer to read and critique the claims of others than to write and publish your own for others to critique. But if you want to become a productive scholar, you need to find ways to escape the trap of endlessly searching the literature. The bad news: There is no magic, crystallizing, writing-enabling source out there. Scholarship proceeds from incomplete mastery of an ever-proliferating literature. You can't possibly have read all of it. Accept that.
- **Write as you search.** Assembling, organizing, and analyzing other scholars' work helps you figure out what you have to say. The point of reviewing the literature isn't to create a complete inventory of all relevant citations, but to explore and discover what has already been done, so that you can make your own contributions to it. That means searching and writing aren't separate. You write as you search, and search as you write. The more you compartmentalize those two elements of scholarship, the more you will mystify the writing process. And academic writing is already mystified enough.
- **Summarize your findings.** Describe for yourself — in writing — the citations you have gathered: What are the key terms? Who are the relevant scholars? What are the main claims? What are the core questions? How are they explored in these sources? What are the most relevant findings? Which do you want to include and mobilize in your own work?
- **Turn your notes into a personal literature map.** What do you already know about your area of the field? What, if anything, is still missing? Which parts of your search directly apply to your current project? Why and how?
- **Describe, for yourself, your possible contributions.** Where might you be able to add to this map of terms, claims, core questions, findings, and conclusions? How can your work contribute to the ongoing conversation in your field?

Following this sequential advice breaks the false and disabling boundary between scholarly searching and scholarly writing. If you write while your search, then you are genuinely integrating yourself into an ongoing scholarly conversation. You are using the literature review process for its intended purpose — to give you the understanding you need to start the writing process, rather than endlessly, superstitiously, preparing for it.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

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