When you're using your computer, tablet, or smartphone to find information, you are usually getting information from one place—the internet.

The internet is a global network of computers that allows for the finding and sharing of mind-blowing amounts of information. There is so much information available via the internet that saying "I found this on the internet" isn't saying much. It's like telling a friend that you found the quarter in your hand "on earth."

The internet is so overwhelmingly vast and complex that it's extremely difficult to generalize about the information you can find there. However, there is one general distinction we can safely make, and that's between the open web and the rest of the internet.

The **open web** refers to the information on the internet you can access for free and without a password. It's more or less the information you access when you Google something.

Googling is quick, easy, and convenient and can yield a vast array of impressive results. You'll find articles, interviews, images, podcasts, videos, books, and all kinds of interesting items. But while the open web is a valuable resource for the kinds of information you look for day to day, it has serious limitations when you're doing research for a scholarly paper.

For one thing, the general nature of internet search engines means that much of the information you find—while broadly related to your topic—won't be useful for your specific argument. This is especially true when you're doing research in subject areas where recent developments are dominating the news cycle.

For example, if you were making an argument about Palestinian attitudes toward the United States during the presidency of Bill Clinton, Googling [Palestinian attitudes United States Clinton] would likely return hundreds of news articles on the most recent crisis in the Middle East along with quotations from former secretary of state Hillary Clinton. You may struggle to find articles explaining Palestinian views of the United States when Bill Clinton was president. It's not that such articles don't exist on the open web, but they may appear several pages into a results set—long past the point where many users have given up and gone on to a new search.
But let's assume you find information that's relevant to your topic. Even then, much of it will be unreliable. This is an obvious point, but it's important enough that it's worth spelling out anyway: just because something's on the internet doesn't mean it's true—or even a bit true.

After all, people can post pretty much anything they want on the open web. And some of these people lie. Others are just wrong. And still others are basically right, but they make little mistakes. Before you can use information from the open web in a research paper, you'll have to investigate whether or not it's reliable.

The time required for this kind of investigation can make Googling the open web one of the least efficient, most time-consuming methods of research there is. Yes, it's quick and easy to type a few words in a box, but sorting through the results can take hours! Fortunately, there is a better way: it's called going to the library.