

## Go the Distance

### Academic insights for distance learners - EXTRA

#### Episode 5: Finding and using source material: with Julian Cooper

It's really attractive to be able to write what you think about your own subject. But actually, it's also really important to justify and show that you have done some additional reading and researching, and you're gaining additional insights. So that means that you're not only writing what your views are: you're actually using others' - well-known authors' perhaps - to support, justify, or maybe add a different context to the view.

When students are looking for good source material, the first rule is to make sure that it fits the subject area. And then you're looking to make it fit with the question, to make it pertinent to the question, and to support and justify some of your own arguments and discussions.

Well, you can look in books; you can look in journals. You can look in - you can look in associated material. It really depends on the context of the subject you're writing about. But it may also be good to take some more current examples - maybe from a magazine - that look at the subject area from a different and lighter context.

Sometimes students get in touch: they're struggling to find material. It just doesn't appear to be available. Usually if you go to your university library, you go online, and many university libraries have chat rooms now, and they're often available 24 hours a day; and they will really help you find, if not the actual source, something that is quite similar.

Where non-native speaking students actually find a problem and it's difficult to understand a paper, really the best tip is to go to the introduction. Go to a summary; go to a précis, and look at what the paper is trying to say, and then you can actually unpick it piece by piece. And it may be that actually the paper really is too complex, because if it's complex to a native speaker or a non-native speaker, generally it's something perhaps you should be avoiding.

Students should really try to avoid promo material - promotional material - that's dressed up as theory. And in particular, in the technology area, there are lots of new concepts and theories coming through all the time. And particular organizations actually try to launch new ideas, new concepts and to get them accepted as, if you like, solid theory, when in effect they're really promoting their own new technology.

When students choose poor material to support their arguments then it's usually quite clear: it doesn't add value to it, it doesn't add depth to it, it doesn't add breadth to it. It really just stands on its own. What it should be doing is actually adding value almost seamlessly to the paper.

The extra points is where they've added: significant justification, new ideas, being critical in a positive way to the subject area, and really showing that they've understood that and dug deeply into the underlying concepts.