



OASIS RESEARCH WRITING
Legal Writing Series

What Makes Research Credible?

A Practical Guide for Researchers, Writers, and Analysts

Introduction

Not all research carries the same weight. Two documents can address the same question, cite sources, and arrive at conclusions — yet one will hold up under scrutiny while the other collapses at the first hard question. The difference is credibility, and credibility is not a matter of confidence or polish. It is built from specific, identifiable qualities that a reader can check.

Credibility matters most when research is used to make a decision — a legal position, a policy recommendation, an investment, a published claim. Anyone relying on research is trusting that the process behind it was sound. This guide sets out what actually makes research credible, and how to test it before relying on it.

What is Credible Research?

Credible research is research whose sources, methods, and conclusions can be independently verified and are demonstrably reliable, current, and free from undisclosed bias. Credibility is not the same as certainty — credible research can still report open questions or conflicting findings, as long as it does so honestly.

Credibility is a property of the process, not the outcome. Research that reaches an unpopular or inconvenient conclusion can be entirely credible; research that reaches a comfortable conclusion through weak sourcing is not.

The Core Pillars of Credible Research

Source Reliability

Every claim traces back to a primary or authoritative source — original data, official records, peer-reviewed studies, statutes, or reported judgments — rather than second-hand summaries.

Verifiability



A reader can independently check each claim against its cited source. Unverifiable claims, however plausible, do not qualify as credible research.

Currency

The sources reflect the most recent, applicable state of knowledge or law. Research built on outdated data or superseded authority is not credible even if it was accurate when first written.

Objectivity

Conclusions follow from the evidence rather than being selected to fit a predetermined position. Contrary evidence is disclosed, not omitted.

Methodological Transparency

The process used to gather and evaluate evidence is stated clearly enough that another researcher could retrace it and test the same conclusion.

Depth of Sourcing

Conclusions rest on multiple, independent sources rather than a single account, particularly where a claim is contested or consequential.

Authorial Expertise

The person or body producing the research has the relevant training or institutional standing to interpret the sources correctly.

Absence of Undisclosed Interest

Any funding, affiliation, or incentive that could influence the conclusion is disclosed, allowing the reader to weigh it appropriately.

Credible Research vs Unreliable Research

Feature	Credible Research	Unreliable Research
Sourcing	Primary and authoritative sources	Secondary summaries, unverified claims
Currency	Up to date, checked for supersession	Outdated, unchecked for later developments
Objectivity	Discloses contrary evidence	Selectively presents supporting evidence only
Verifiability	Claims are traceable and checkable	Claims cannot be traced to a specific source
Methodology	Process is stated and repeatable	Process is opaque or undisclosed
Interests	Conflicts of interest disclosed	Funding or bias undisclosed



How to Test the Credibility of Research

Credibility can be assessed systematically, using the same discipline a careful reviewer would apply before relying on a document.

1. Trace each key claim to its original source, rather than accepting a citation at face value.
2. Check the publication or decision date, and confirm nothing material has superseded it since.
3. Identify the author or institution, and assess whether their expertise matches the claim being made.
4. Look for disclosed limitations, conflicting findings, or acknowledged uncertainty — their presence is a positive signal, not a weakness.
5. Cross-check central claims against at least one independent source.
6. Identify any funding source, affiliation, or institutional interest that could shape the conclusion.
7. Assess whether the method used to reach the conclusion is described clearly enough to be retraced.

Credible research is not research that sounds certain. It is research that survives someone else checking its work.

Common Threats to Research Credibility

- **Confirmation bias** — selecting or emphasising sources that support a predetermined conclusion.
- **Citation laundering** — citing a secondary source that itself cites an unverified or unreliable original claim.
- **Stale authority** — relying on a source that has since been overruled, amended, retracted, or superseded.
- **Over-reliance on a single source** — treating one account as sufficient for a consequential or contested claim.
- **Undisclosed interest** — omitting a funding relationship or institutional stake that a reader would reasonably want to know.
- **False precision** — presenting a tentative or contested finding with more certainty than the underlying evidence supports.

Illustrative Example

Weak Version

A report claims that a proposed regulation will reduce industry revenue by 30%, citing "industry analysts," with no named source, no date, and no methodology. The figure cannot be traced or checked.

Credible Version



The same claim, sourced to a named economic study, dated within the past year, disclosing its methodology and margin of error, and noting that two other studies reached lower estimates — allows a reader to verify the figure and weigh its reliability against competing findings.

Best Practices for Producing Credible Research

- Cite primary sources wherever possible, and treat secondary sources as a starting point rather than a destination.
- Date-check every source before relying on it, particularly law, regulation, and fast-moving data.
- State the limitations of the research candidly, rather than allowing confident language to imply more certainty than exists.
- Disclose any affiliation, funding, or interest that could reasonably affect how the conclusion is read.
- Keep a research trail — a log of what was checked, when, and against which source — so the work can be defended or revisited.

Frequently Asked Questions

Does credible research always reach a definite conclusion?

No. Credible research can honestly report that evidence is mixed or unsettled; forcing a false certainty is itself a threat to credibility.

Is a peer-reviewed source automatically credible?

Peer review is a strong signal, not a guarantee. It should still be checked for currency, scope, and whether it has been contradicted by later work.

How many sources are enough to support a claim?

There is no fixed number; the threshold rises with how contested or consequential the claim is. A single source is rarely sufficient for a significant conclusion.

Can research be credible and still be wrong?

Yes. Credibility describes the soundness of the process, not a guarantee of a correct outcome. Even rigorous research can be revised by later evidence.

What is the fastest way to spot unreliable research?

Try to trace a central claim back to its original source. If it cannot be traced, or the trail ends at an unverified secondary account, the research is unreliable regardless of how confidently it is written.

Does disclosing limitations weaken research?



No — it strengthens it. A reader trusts a document more, not less, when its author is candid about what remains uncertain.

Research Credibility Checklist

- ☐ Every key claim traces to a primary or authoritative source.
- ☐ Sources are current and checked for supersession or retraction.
- ☐ Contrary or conflicting evidence is disclosed, not omitted.
- ☐ The method used to reach conclusions is stated clearly.
- ☐ Central claims are supported by more than one independent source.
- ☐ Any funding, affiliation, or institutional interest is disclosed.
- ☐ Uncertainty is stated honestly rather than smoothed over.
- ☐ A research trail exists that another person could retrace.

Conclusion

Credibility is not an impression created by tone or formatting; it is a set of verifiable properties — reliable sourcing, currency, objectivity, and transparency about method and limitation. Research that has these properties can be trusted even when its conclusions are uncomfortable or incomplete. Research that lacks them cannot be trusted even when its conclusions sound confident. Building credibility into the process, from the first source gathered to the final claim written, is what makes research worth relying on.