Sources: The BEAM of Research

"Writers rely *on background sources,* interpret *or* analyze *exhibits,* engage *arguments, and* follow *methods." (Bizup 2008)*

As writers and scholars, we sometimes divide texts into "primary" and "secondary" sources. This divisions, however, can have limitations. Remember: the key is not what our sources are (inherently), but what we are doing with them in our writing. After all, our uses of even a single source can change over the course of an essay. We need a vocabulary that allows us to discuss sources not in terms of essence, but in terms of function. Below is a new vocabulary for discussing sources that draws on the work of Joseph Bizup:

Background

Definition: when the writer uses materials to establish facts and to provide authoritative support for his/her assertions. When used as background, the writer takes the facts to be accepted knowledge and does not question them, and expects the reader to do so as well (if the facts are questioned or contested, however, these same sources may become argument sources).

Example: a list of important figures working on a problem; an argument that the author doesn't engage with; a casual reference to a cultural or environmental phenomenon; etc.

Exhibit (Related to Evidence, Example)

Definition: when the writer uses source material for direct examination or analysis.

Example: in a literature paper, a block quotation from a poem you are discussing; in an art history paper, an image; in a political science paper, survey data; etc.

Argument

Definition: when the writer uses sources to engage with or respond directly by countering, extending, or refining the claims made by the source's author(s). Most will be academic sources written by scholars in the discipline of your topic. These are the sources you engage in conversation.

Example: a statement about the exhibit (or a related one) by an outside critic or scholar.

Method

Definition: when the writer uses sources to borrow an approach, key concept, idea, or method. Or, sources after which you model your own approach to inquiry, writing, or argument.

Example: a statement or question asked about an unrelated exhibit, reapplied in the context of the present exhibit; disciplinary key terms like ethos, capital, etc.

Adapted from the following materials:
Duke University: http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/beam-useofsources-1.original.pdf
CUNY: http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/honorsthesis13/files/2013/09/The-BEAM-of-Research.pdf

BEAM as a Reading Tool

As you're reading, BEAM can improve your confidence about how an author uses sources.

- When a source enters as a "name-drop," it is probably background. If it is a reference you keep seeing in a number of places, you might want to look it up.
- When a source enters as a block quote that gets examined closely, it is probably an exhibit. For understanding what the author is saying right now, you don't need to look it up; the analysis should follow the quote pretty quickly. On the other hand, if you want to argue against the author, you may benefit from learning the specific context of this quoted text.
- When a source enters as a line or two that gets parsed for ideas, it is probably an argument. As with exhibits, everything you need for surface understanding should be there… but take the summary with a grain of salt, especially if the author is disagreeing with the source. Again, if you want to join this conversation, it is probably a good idea to look up the source and hear what it is saying in its own words.
- Methods are subtle, so you might not notice them. But thinking about method might help you see similarities and differences across several different texts and arguments.

Using BEAM as Writers who Read

When you mark up the source-use across a whole text, you can start to notice patterns of development, patterns you might use in constructing your own essays. Consider: What effect does beginning a paper with an exhibit have on the reader? What about beginning with a specific argument? a series of background references? How might you follow any of these openings? What would you expect next?

Using BEAM in Your Own Writing

When starting a project, especially (but not only) a research project, aiming for a mix of sources you could use for background, exhibits, arguments, and methods will go a long way toward ensuring that you have the material to build something more than just a dump of disconnected information on the page.

Works Cited:

Bizup, Joseph. "BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-Based Writing." Rhetoric Review 27.1 (2008): 72-86.

Bartholomae, David. "Inventing the University." When Writers Can't Write: Studies in Writer's Block and Other Composing Process Problems. Ed. Mike Rose. 1985. 134-165. Print.

Adapted from the following materials:
Duke University: http://twp.duke.edu/uploads/media_items/beam-useofsources-1.original.pdf
CUNY: http://macaulay.cuny.edu/eportfolios/honorsthesis13/files/2013/09/The-BEAM-of-Research.pdf