

## FROM ESSENTIAL TO FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES FOR SOURCES

Professor Joseph Bizup, Boston University

### Developing a vocabulary for talking about sources (BEAM):

A common way of categorizing sources is to separate them into PRIMARY and SECONDARY sources. The problem is, the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” sources, as useful as it may be in some fields, does not help us very much as writers. The key thing for us as writers is not what our sources ARE (inherently), but what we are DOING with them in our writing. In other words, we need a vocabulary that allows us to categorize and discuss our sources not in terms of ESSENCE but in terms of FUNCTION. An alternative vocabulary may be represented by the acronym BEAM (Background, Exhibit, Argument, Method).

#### Background:

**Def:** Something a writer relies on for general information that needs to be presented in the essay.

**Paradigm:** Encyclopedia article

#### Exhibit, Example:

**Def:** Something that the writer holds up for analysis or interpretation.

**Paradigms:** 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, a body of survey data.

**Def:** Something the writer uses to illustrate a point.

**Paradigm:** A statement used as evidence

#### Argument, Assertion:

**Def:** A source the writer engages in “conversation.” A source whose ideas the writer is using, refuting, affirming, appealing to, refining, or qualifying in some way. Very often, this source will be in the same genre as the piece the writer is writing.

**Paradigm:** In an academic paper, a statement about the exhibit by an outside critic or scholar.

#### Method:

**Def:** A source (or body of sources) from which the writer takes his/her method of analysis. Often does not appear explicitly and is not cited in the writer’s piece. Sometimes invoked by name-dropping.

**Paradigm:** A text that lays out a theory, method, or vocabulary the writer uses. Sometimes called a “theoretical lens.”

As a writer’s proficiency with using sources increases, it is not unusual for sources to play more than one role—even more than one role at a time—in an essay.