

Information Evaluation

Tips and Techniques

Not all information available in books, periodicals, and Web sites are appropriate of university-level research. Information a researcher finds during the research process may be irrelevant, unjustified, or, simply, wrong. The following criteria should be kept in mind during the research process to help determine which information sources are worthwhile.

What kind of information source is it?

Books: Most books fall into one of two categories - reference books or monographs.

Reference Books: A reference book is usually a tertiary information source that draws on previous research and writings for content. Most library users consult reference books for either quick factual data or as a first step in the research process as these types of books often provide topic overviews. Reference books are not intended to be read cover-to-cover like a novel. Reference books often consist of a series of signed or unsigned "entries" or "articles." These sections are often listed alphabetically by subject. Examples of reference books include: encyclopedias, directories, dictionaries, atlases, and almanacs. Some reference works, like the Encyclopedia Britannica, contain many volumes.

Monographs: Monographs are individual books focusing on one particular subject. (Usually when a person thinks of "a book" they are thinking of a monograph.) Monographs can be either popular or scholarly. Determining if a monograph is scholarly can be a difficult matter. The criteria checkpoints that exist for scholarly journals can often be applied to scholarly monographs as well. Scholarly monographs are usually written by a scholar in his/her academic discipline, information about the author including his/her degree and university affiliation will be included, the content will be focused in scope and aimed at other scholars in the field, and a works cited list will appear at the conclusion of the text. Any publisher may choose to publish a scholarly monograph. Most monographs published by university presses are scholarly.

Periodicals:

Scholarly Journals: A scholarly journal is a periodical written for scholars in a particular academic discipline. A scholarly journal's intent is to add to the literature of the field through the publication of original research. The authors of scholarly articles usually maintain a terminal degree in their field and their credentials and university affiliation are listed. The scholarly article tends to be longer in length and contains an extensive reference list. Scholarly journals are usually released on a monthly or quarterly schedule. The most scholarly of scholarly journals are peer-reviewed.

"Peer-reviewed" or "refereed" journals are scholarly publications that require experts in the subject field or "peers" to review and edit articles prior to publication. This process is intended to improve the soundness and accuracy of the articles published. Peer-reviewed journals tend to be scholarly in nature.

Scholarly journals include Shakespeare Quarterly, Business Ethics Quarterly, Educational Research, Journal of Leisure Research, and Journal of Sport History.

Trade Publications: Trade publications focus on a certain industry and are intended for people working in that field or trade. Trade publications are intended to keep people involved in the industry informed about trends and events in their field. Trade publications are not considered scholarly. Examples include publications like Beverage World, Chain Store Age, Supermarket Business, Stores, Home Textiles Today and Frozen Food Age.

General/Popular Magazines: General/popular magazine articles are written for the general public. They contain popular interest information and tend to be shorter in length. The article authors are usually professional writers employed by the magazine or freelancers that write on any topic. Articles are often unsigned. A reference list is never included. Magazines are usually released on a weekly or monthly schedule. General/popular magazines are not scholarly in nature. Examples include Glamour, Esquire, Good Housekeeping, People, Time, and Newsweek.

Newspapers: Newspapers are daily or weekly publications (often printed on newsprint) whose main purpose is to keep their reading public abreast of current events. Most articles are written by reporters, appear soon after events depicted have taken place, and are shorter in length. Many newspapers, however, do run longer in-depth features and can be a good source of a wide variety of non-scholarly information. Examples of newspapers include: The New York Times, The

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, The Christian Science Monitor, The Washington Post, and USA Today.

Web sites: In the 21st century "Information Society" a great deal of available information can be found on the World Wide Web (WWW). Student researchers will find a wealth of data for research projects, papers, and speeches via the Internet. Students must be aware of the fact that anyone with a small amount of technical know-how can launch their own site containing inflammatory language, outrageous statements and just plain wrong information. Evaluating a Web site requires the same basic skills for evaluating books and periodicals and a little cyber savvy.

Other: Other types of information sources do exist. These include newsletters, interviews, television programs, films, radio broadcasts, databases, e-mail correspondence, etc. The same basic evaluative criteria apply.

Is the information source a primary, secondary, or tertiary source?

Primary Sources

Primary sources are original works (sometimes referred to as evidence) created by participants and observers of the time period involved. Examples of primary sources include, but are not limited to: autobiographies, cases, correspondence, description and travel, diaries, interviews, letters, journal articles (if reporting original research results), memos, newspaper/popular magazine articles (if reporting on events-not analyzing events), original Documents (i.e. birth certificate or a trial transcript), patents, personal narrative, proceedings of meetings, conferences and symposia, speeches, and survey research (i.e. market surveys or public opinion polls). Primary sources are also original creative work like original artwork, photography, fiction, poetry, films, etc.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are works that interpret, analyze, critique, comment on, or evaluate primary sources. Secondary sources are usually written "after the fact." Secondary sources can include:

Biographies, criticism and interpretation, commentaries, dissertations, indexes, abstracts, bibliographies (used to locate primary & secondary sources), journal articles (may also be primary), monographs, newspaper/popular magazine articles (may also be primary)

Tertiary Sources

Tertiary sources are traditional reference works. They consist of information that is a summarized from primary and secondary sources. Tertiary sources are generally good starting points for research but, often, will not provide all of the needed information for college-level assignments. Tertiary sources can include: almanacs, encyclopedias, and fact books.

Evaluative Criteria

Bibliographic Data:

Author: Scholarly works will provide the readers relevant author information including the author's academic background and his/her university affiliation. Less scholarly works will provide an author's name and, perhaps, some non-relevant information like their city of residence and hobbies. If no author is given then this work should not be used as the major resource for any university-level assignment but should only be used in conjunction with other higher-level resources.

Date: Always consult the date of a particular information source to determine if the data found in that source is still valid.

Periodical Reputation: Find out how this particular publication is perceived by the academic community. (See "Reviews" below")

Publisher: Determine if the publisher is scholarly or not. Most university presses publish scholarly works although some commercial publishing houses also produce worthwhile books. Make certain that the publisher is not a vanity press. Authors will pay vanity presses to publish their work when a university or commercial publishing house will not.

Content:

Audience: Determine what audience the author is writing for. If this source is intended for children, adolescents, or, sometimes, the general public then this work may not be suitable for university-level research.

Bias: Determine if the author is providing an objective view of the topic and examining both sides of an issue or if the author is arguing a particular point. If the author leans to one particular viewpoint then they are biased. A biased information source is not necessarily bad. The information contained in that source might be

helpful. Just make certain to also consult more objective works to keep the research balanced.

Data: Make certain that the information provided in an information source is well researched and well presented. If an information source presents questionable data or is filled with obvious errors then this source is suspicious and should not be used.

Scope: Always look at the work as a whole and try to understand its scope or coverage. Tertiary sources, like a general encyclopedia, will often have a large scope and discuss many topics. More scholarly works will have a focused topic that is examined in detail. Although tertiary sources are fine places to begin research, they are not usually considered adequate for university-level research.

Reviews: There are many library resources that can assist in the evaluation process.

Magazine for Libraries: This reference book contains periodical reviews written by librarians.

Book reviews: Many periodicals, like the New York Times, review published books.

Evaluative Questions to Consider

Is the information verifiable?

Who is writing the particular piece and what authority do they have on the subject? Where did the author get his/her information? Does the text contain a list of references? Can the information be confirmed in other research sources?

Is the information timely?

When was the information produced? Have events occurred since publication that dates the work? Is this the most current edition?

Is the information biased?

Is the information presented in a clear objective manner? Is the author arguing a point of some kind? Does the author use clear and concise language or use inflammatory or persuasive language?

Is this information source suitable for university-level research?

Is the information source scholarly or not? What is the reputation of the publication? What type of publisher? Is it a reputable, disreputable, or vanity press? Who is the article/book/Web site written for?

Any Questions? Then consult a librarian.

Moon Campus Library: 412-262-8272 or librarym@rmu.edu or Stop in!

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