Evaluating Resources

A guide to evaluating search engines, books, articles and websites for research.

Part 1 - The Basics of Resource Evaluation

An important component of research is knowing how to evaluate the resources you've found. The aim of this guide is to give you the tools to determine if your resources are the right ones for your research. With every type of resource you use, whether it be a search engine, book, article or website, there are five main criteria to keep in mind:

1. Authority
   - Who is the author and/or publisher?

2. Accuracy
   - How reliable is the information provided?

3. Objectivity
   - What is the purpose of the resource?

4. Currency
   - How up-to-date is the resource?

5. Coverage
   - Does the resource contain information relevant to your topic?

This guide will look at four types of resources - search engines/databases, books, articles and websites - and discuss the special considerations that need to be made in evaluating each of them.
Part II - Evaluating Your Search Engine/Database

Internet search engines can be great research tools, but academic research also relies greatly on databases. (See sidebar: **What is a database?**) Consider the following questions when evaluating whether an internet search engine or a database will be the best tool for you:

1. **Authority**
   - Who created the search engine/database and what are their affiliations?
   - What is the reputation of the creator?

2. **Accuracy**
   - Where does their information come from?
   - What is the quality of the information they provide?
   - What selection criteria, if any, do they use in choosing the sources they index?

3. **Objectivity**
   - What is the purpose of the search engine/database?

4. **Currency**
   - What years does it cover?
   - How up to date is the information provided?

5. **Coverage**
   - Who is the intended audience?

See the box below to view a comparison of Google, an all-purpose database and a subject-specific database.
## Comparing Search Engines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliations</th>
<th>Google Canada</th>
<th>Gale, an educational resource company</th>
<th>product of the American Geological Association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>worldwide web</td>
<td>journals, magazines, and newspapers from all major disciplines</td>
<td>journals, books, dissertations and conference proceedings in the geological sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>varies</td>
<td>published materials from reputable periodicals</td>
<td>scholarly publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection criteria</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>sources must be from established journals, magazines and newspapers</td>
<td>sources must be from scholarly research in the geological sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>quick and easy access to web content</td>
<td>indexing of and access to educational/informational materials</td>
<td>indexing of and access to scholarly research in the field of geology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended audience</td>
<td>everyone</td>
<td>students and scholars in a wide variety of disciplines</td>
<td>students and scholars in the geological sciences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part III - Evaluating Books

Not all books are created equal. Some entertain, some argue, some inform. Some might do all three. It’s your job as a researcher to learn how to recognize which of these categories a book falls into and whether or not it meets your research needs. These are the things you need to consider when evaluating books:

1. **Authority**
   - Who are the authors or editors? Are they experts in the subject matter of the book?
   - Who is the publisher? Was the book published by a commercial, specialty, vanity or university press?

2. **Accuracy**
   - Is the information correct and accurate? Can the facts be verified?
   - Does the book contain footnotes and/or a bibliography? Are sources properly cited?

3. **Objectivity**
   - What is the purpose of the book: to inform, persuade or entertain?
   - Is the book based on fact or opinion?

4. **Currency**
   - When was the book published?
   - Is the information up to date or is the information timeless?

5. **Coverage**
   - Who is the intended audience: the general public, students or scholars?
   - Does the book contain information relevant to your subject?
   - Does the book provide comprehensive coverage of the subject matter?

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**Evaluation Tips**

Consult [book reviews](#) to learn more about the author(s) and the quality of the book.

Look for an [author biography](#) on the jacket or within the book to determine their credentials and affiliations.

Scan the [table of contents](#) and [index](#) to find out what is covered in the book.

Read the [preface](#) and [introduction](#) to determine the purpose of the book.

Check the [publication date](#) to determine the currency of the book.
Comparing Books

If you were required to write a paper on particle physics, which of these three books would be your best source of information? View the comparison chart and decide.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author credentials</th>
<th>Publisher</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Physics of Star Trek</td>
<td>Ph.D. in physics</td>
<td>HarperCollins</td>
<td>to entertain and inform</td>
<td>general</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quantum Physics for Dummies</td>
<td>Ph.D. in physics</td>
<td>For Dummies</td>
<td>to inform</td>
<td>general, beginning student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particle Astrophysics</td>
<td>Ph.D in physics</td>
<td>Oxford University Press</td>
<td>to educate</td>
<td>university students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part IV - Evaluating Articles

Articles generally come from newspapers, magazines or journals. It's important to be aware of the differences between popular periodicals (newspapers and magazines) and academic journals in order to determine which will be most appropriate for your research. Consider the following questions and view the comparison chart below:

1. Authority
   - Who are the authors?
   - Does the article include the author's credentials and/or affiliations?
   - What type of publication does the article appear in?
   - Does the publication have credibility and a good reputation?

2. Accuracy
   - Does the article cite references?
   - Is the work subject to peer review to determine the reliability of the content?

3. Objectivity
   - What is the purpose of the article?
   - Does the article present factual information or opinion?

4. Currency
   - When was the article published?
   - Does the article cover a recent topic?
   - If references are provided, when were they published?

5. Coverage
   - Does the article contain information relevant to your topic?
   - Who is the intended audience?
   - Do the articles within the periodical cover a wide range of topics or focus on a narrow subject area?
• Do the articles within the periodical provide overviews on topics or present original research?

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**Is It Peer-Reviewed?**

Professors will often require their students to use peer-reviewed articles in their papers. A journal can be scholarly, but this does not always mean it's peer-reviewed. How can you be certain if an article is peer-reviewed or not? Here are a couple of tips to help you:

1. **Let the database be your guide**

   Many databases allow you to refine your search to only peer-reviewed articles.

   Some separate your search results for you and give you the option to view only the peer-reviewed results.

   Some also provide an information page on the journal the article appears in and will indicate if the journal is peer-reviewed.


   This “is a bibliographic database providing detailed, comprehensive, and authoritative information on serials published throughout the world.” Simply enter the name of the journal in the database's search box to bring up information on it.

   Note: this database uses the term "refereed" in place of "peer-reviewed."

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Please ask staff at the Archer Library [Help Desk](#) if you need help in determining if your resource is peer-reviewed.
Comparing Periodicals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>The Globe and Mail</th>
<th>Maclean’s Magazine</th>
<th>Journalism Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of periodical</td>
<td>newspaper</td>
<td>magazine</td>
<td>journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>staff writers/journalists</td>
<td>staff writers/journalists</td>
<td>academics in the field of journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References cited?</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer-reviewed?</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>news and opinions covering a wide range of topics</td>
<td>news and opinions covering a wide range of topics</td>
<td>scholarly articles in the field of journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intended audience</td>
<td>general reader</td>
<td>general reader</td>
<td>students and professionals in journalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When is it ok…

…to use newspapers and magazines?

Newspapers and magazines can be valuable resources when you need:

- information on a current event
- primary sources
- background information on a topic
- interviews
Part V - Evaluating Websites

The internet contains a vast amount of information, but because anyone and everyone can contribute to it, it's important to think critically about the information you find online.

1. Authority
   - Who is the author of the page?
   - Can anyone add content to the page? (eg. wikis)
   - What institution or organization hosts the page?
   - Do the author and/or page host provide contact information? What is their reputation?

2. Accuracy
   - How accurate are the information and links on the page?
   - Do the links lead to pages relevant to the topic? Do they work?

3. Objectivity
   - What is the purpose of the page: to persuade, argue, inform or to sell a product?

4. Currency
   - How current is the information on the page?
   - Does the page contain information on when it was created and/or last updated?
   - Are the links up to date?

5. Coverage
   - How does the information on the website compare to information available from other sources, such as books and periodicals?
   - Does the page provide information not readily available elsewhere?
How valuable is the information on the page?
Who is the intended audience?

Domain Codes

The domain code of a website can give you a good idea of the reliability of the information on the page and where the information is coming from. For example, websites hosted by government agencies and academic institutions are generally reliable sources.

Below are some of the more common domain codes you may encounter:

- .com - commercial source, available to anyone
- .edu - educational institution
- .gc.ca - government (Canada)
- .gov - government (US)
- .int - international organization (eg. NATO)
- .net - network, available to anyone
- .org - non-profit organization

More domain codes, including country/region codes, can be found here.