Evaluating your search results

It is important to evaluate information before you use it in your academic work to ensure that the information is relevant and trustworthy. This helpsheet offers general guidance and also looks at specific types of information sources such as books, journals, newspapers and the Internet.

Starting your research

Before you start your research, consider the following:

- **What** do I need to find out? *Facts and figures, images and graphs, theories, case studies, projects, reviews, reports and proceedings etc.*
- **Why** do I need this information? *Background knowledge, to answer a question, to get new ideas, to understand a topic, to substantiate a theory, to prepare for a seminar, to support a hypothesis, to write and essay/dissertation etc.*
- **When** do I need this information? *Immediately, before a deadline, for future reference etc.*
- **How** am I going to find the information? *Think about search terms/phrases, related subjects, synonyms, concepts etc.*
- **Where** am I going to find this information? *Library catalogue, Internet, journals, databases, broadcasts, newspapers, interviews and questionnaires etc*
- **Who** created this information? *How do I know that the information is relevant, trustworthy and accurate?*

It is important to consider the above questions to ensure that the information retrieved is:

- relevant and appropriate to your information need
- of a suitable quality, breadth and level
- accurate and trustworthy
- from reputable sources

Evaluating search results

Once you have carried out your research and found information, consider the following points before you use it in your work:

Authority

- Who is the author?
- What do you know about the author from the publication?
- Is the author well respected?
- Are the publishers known in this subject area?
- Is the information supported by facts, bibliography, citations?
- Is the information sponsored by a recognized and reputable organization?

Relevance

- Is the information what you were hoping for?
- What is the purpose of the information/why was it written?
- Does it have sufficient detail?
- Is it at the right level?
- Is it well presented?
- Does it have footnotes/bibliography/further reading?

Intent
- Why did the author write this information: academic interest, financial gain, propaganda, sponsorship?

Objectivity
- Does the author give a balanced view of the topic or provide access to other material stating opposing views?

Currency
- When was this information written?
- When was it last updated?
- Is it important that the information is up-to-date? This will depend on the nature of your research eg. If you are writing about the increased use of Web 2.0 technologies by using statistics, it is important that the statistics are current, however if you are writing about the history of the internet, you may use older sources to illustrate how it was used in the 1990s.

Sources of information

Books
Books are a useful source of information for many types of research. However, books can take a long time to get in to print, so do not always contain the latest information. This is very important for some disciplines such as technical subjects. Consider the following when using books:
- Can you tell what the subject of the book is from its title or cover?
- Do you recognize the author as an expert in the particular subject?
- Does the book tell you about the author" s qualifications and experience?
- Is the publisher known as a specialist in this subject area?
- When was the book published? This information is usually indicated on the reverse of the title page.
- If the book is recently published, does the information appear to be up-to-date?
- Does the preface/forward indicate why the book has been written, what the aims are, who is it aimed at, and at what level?
- By looking at the Contents Page, does the coverage appear sufficient?
- Does the book have an index at the back? An index helps you find information quickly and is an indication of the quality of the resource.
- Does the book have a bibliography? Has the author used references, footnotes or endnotes? If so, this can be an indication of the quality of the author" s research.

Journals
Journals (also known as periodicals, magazines or serials) are a valuable source of information as they are published on a regular basis (weekly, monthly, quarterly etc). Journals can be fairly broad in their coverage eg. *New Scientist*, but can also be very specialized eg. *Journal of organizational computing and electronic commerce.* The articles contained within journals can be very specific, detailed and up-to-date. Use the right type of journal for your research eg. Trade journals will offer a practical view, whilst other journals might offer more academic information or a popular viewpoint. Consider the following points when using journals in your research:
- Is the journal at the right level or offering the right sort of information for your need? Journals can be broadly divided into three categories: popular, substantive and scholarly. Most academic work will necessitate the use of substantive or scholarly publications, although popular titles can also be used to illustrate a point, or as a source of information in their own right. The use of language should indicate whether the journal is aimed at an academic, specialized or general audience. Scholarly journals look more serious, with few images, and lots of text.
- What is the scope/coverage of the journal? This information may be found in an editorial statement at the front of the journal.

- Is the author(s) of the article well known in the particular field.
- Are you aware of the author" s qualifications, current post/role/occupation/expertise? A scholarly journal usually makes this information available, whereas articles in substantive and popular journals are often written by freelance writers or a member of the editorial staff.
- Articles in scholarly journals will usually cite the sources of information used through footnotes and/or a bibliography. This adds substance to the article itself, as well as further sources that can be used in your research.
- Is the journal refereed? The content of refereed journals (or peer reviewed journals) has been approved by other academics or experts for quality and accuracy.

Newspapers

Newspapers are usually published daily or weekly, therefore contain the latest news, events and developments. Consider the following when using newspapers as a source of information:
- Who is the author/journalist? Are they expert in the particular field?
- Who is the intended readership of the newspaper?
- What is the bias of the newspaper eg. Class, gender, geographical region, or politics etc.
- Are the articles sponsored?

The Internet

Evaluation is particularly important when using the internet as a source of information because:
- It is easy and cheap to put information on the Internet
- The Internet is unregulated ie. There is no single body that controls, manages, polices, or organizes the Internet.
- There are many valuable resources on the Internet, but also much information which is poorly written, badly researched, deceptive, propaganda etc.
- Resources such as Wikis, can be updated by anyone eg. Wikipedia

Tip!

Advanced search techniques can be used when searching the internet to ensure that the most relevant information is found eg. Use " speech marks" to search for a phrase such as *"Human computer interaction"* , or +plus and – minus signs to include and exclude certain words eg. – monty
+*python* to find information on *pythons* and not on *Monty Python*. Using +*ac* or +*edu*, will find sites that originate from academic sources eg. *"database management" +ac*

Consider the following points when using the Internet as a source of information:
- Is the site a personal one or hosted by a commercial provider?
- Who is responsible for the information?
- What type of domain does it come from? For example websites with „ .ac" or „ .edu" in the URL
  come from academic sources and therefore have probably undergone a certain level of quality and editorial control before being published eg. www.intute.ac.uk
- Have you accessed the information via a portal/site owned by an academic establishment, institution, organization? If so, then this should suggest better quality and managed information, however the information should still be evaluated eg. www.intute.ac.uk or http://bubl.ac.uk http://www.hw.ac.uk/libwww/irn/pinakes/pinakes.html
- Is the site sponsored?
- Who is the site aimed at?
- Is the site well designed, with good navigation?
- Do the links work?
- When was the site last updated and by whom?
- Are there contact details?

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