

Evaluating Information

Information comes from a variety of sources and in a wide (and growing) variety of formats. Students have traditionally used journals, magazines and books. Now information occurs in many formats, for example, websites, blogs, wikis, social networking sites and discussion lists. How can you decide if information is appropriate for use in your assignment?

Check your assignment marking guide for an indication of what material to use as sometimes the guide will specify the type of information required. Another good place to look is on the Moodle site related to your course (note, not all courses have their own Moodle site). Your course tutor will also be able to guide you and it is worth checking with them about using some sources, (e.g. Wikipedia).

Ask the following questions to decide if information is suitable for your needs:

1. **Who is the material written for?** Is it for students, professional experts or the general public?
2. **Who is the material written by?** Who is the author? What information can you find about them? Do you know what their qualifications are and are they well known in their area of expertise? Is the author an academic scholar or alternatively, are they a journalist/other author or commentator writing for the general public? Do they have any potential biases? (If there is no author you should be concerned).
3. **What language is used?** Is it in the language of a particular discipline, with specialised, technical words? If it is very difficult to read and understand, it may not be useful. If the material is written for a more general (popular) audience it may not be sufficiently detailed to be of use.
4. **How relevant** is the material to key concepts in your search strategy or assignment topic? (See handout on *Assignment Instructions*.) Does the title of the text indicate its topic and does it cover the area you are interested in?
5. **When was the material published?** Is it the most recent/up to date information/research on the topic and is this an important consideration in your research? Whilst you may need material that is up to date (e.g. published within the last five years), do you also need historical information?
6. **Is there a review process?** E.g. for a journal article is it peer reviewed/refereed/edited?
7. **Is the content objective?** Is there bias to the information? Is there an editorial agenda/viewpoint/sponsor's bias? Alternatively, is there evidence of research that is backed up by evidence? Where did the author get their information? Is there a reference list or bibliography and are the references recent?
8. **What geographic coverage** does it have? For example if you need New Zealand information does it include this?

Some extra tips for websites:
Use all of the above plus:

- Look at the 'about' or 'who are we' section of the site
- When the site was last updated?
- Is there evidence of sponsorship?
- Use Google Advanced Search to 'find pages that link to the page'
- Is it clear who wrote the content and is that person contactable?

Important note:

Having found your material note down all the details carefully so that you can reference it appropriately in your assignment- (see handout *An Introduction to Referencing: Avoiding Plagiarism at ARA*).