

Which resources are suitable for my research?

In the research process you will encounter many types of resources including **books**, **articles** and **websites**. Not everything you find on your topic will be suitable. How do you make sense of what is out there and evaluate its authority and appropriateness for your research? Here are some points to consider:

SUITABILITY

Scope. What is the breadth of the article, book, website or other material? Is it a general work that provides an overview of the topic or is it specifically focused on only one aspect of your topic? Does the breadth of the work match your own expectations? Does the resource cover the right time period that you are interested in?

Audience. Who is the intended audience for this source? Is the material too technical or too clinical? Is it too elementary or basic? You are more likely to retrieve articles written for the appropriate audience if you start off in the right database. Please don't hesitate to ask a librarian to help you select the appropriate database(s).

Timeliness. When was the source published? If it is a website, when was it last updated? Avoid using undated websites. Our online catalog and databases always indicate the publication date in the bibliographic citation.

Scholarly vs. Popular

A **scholarly journal** is generally one that is published by and for experts. In order to be published in a scholarly journal, an article must first go through the **peer review** process in which a group of widely acknowledged experts in a field reviews it for content, scholarly soundness and academic value. In most cases, articles in scholarly journals present new, previously un-published research. Scholarly sources will almost always include:

- Bibliography and footnotes
- Author's name and academic credentials

As a general rule, scholarly journals are not printed on glossy paper, do not contain advertisements for popular consumer items and do not have colorful graphics and illustrations (there are, of course, exceptions).

Popular magazines range from highly respected publications such as *Scientific American* and *The Atlantic Monthly* to general interest newsmagazines like *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report*. Articles in these publications tend to be written by staff writers or freelance journalists and are geared towards a general audience. Articles in popular magazines are more likely to be shorter than those in academic journals. While most magazines adhere to editorial standards, articles do not go through a peer review process and rarely contain bibliographic citations.

Tip: When searching a journal index such as **Academic Search Premier**, try narrowing your search by limiting to **refereed publications**. This will retrieve only scholarly journals matching your search terms. Some other journal indexes offer this or a similar option.

If you search specialized databases such as **Web of Science** you will retrieve only scholarly articles since only academic journals are indexed in this database.

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Critical Evaluation of Resources

Critical Evaluation of Resources (continued)

AUTHORITY

Who is the author? What are his or her academic credentials? What else has this author written? Sometimes information about the author is listed somewhere in the article. Other times, you may need to consult another resource to get background information on the author. Sometimes it helps to search the author's name in a general web search engine like **Google**.

OTHER INDICATORS

Documentation. A bibliography, along with footnotes, indicate that the author has consulted other sources and serves to authenticate the information that he or she is presenting. In websites, expect links or footnotes documenting sources, and referring to additional resources and other viewpoints.

Objectivity. What point of view does the author represent? Is the article an editorial that is trying to argue a position? Is the website sponsored by a company or organization that advocates a certain philosophy? Is the article published in a magazine that has a particular editorial position?

Primary vs. secondary research. In determining the appropriateness of a resource, it may be helpful to determine whether it is primary research or secondary research.

Primary research presents original research methods or findings for the first time. Examples include:

- A journal article, book, or other publication that presents new findings and new theories, usually with the data
- A newspaper account written by a journalist who was present at the event he or she is describing is a primary source (an eye-witness, first-hand account)

A **secondary research** does not present new research but rather provides a compilation or evaluation of previously presented material. Examples include:

- A scientific article summarizing research or data, such as in *Scientific American*, *Discover*, *Annual Review of Genetics*, or *Biological Reviews*
- An encyclopedia entry and entries in most other Reference books
- A textbook

Additional Website Criteria

- Is a web author identified? Can you determine the producer's credentials? If you cannot determine the author of the site, then think twice about using it as a resource.
- Is the site sponsored by a group or organization? If it is sponsored by a group or company, does the group advocate a certain philosophy? Try to find and read "About Us" or similar information.
- Is there any bias evident in the site? Is the site trying to sell you a product? Ask why the page was put on the web?
- Is there a date on the website? Is it sufficiently up-to-date? If there is no date, again, think twice about using it. Undated factual or statistical information should not be used; question where it came from.
- How credible and authentic are the links to other resources? Are the links evaluated or annotated in any way?