

ONLINE INFORMATION SKILLS

Evaluating and validating information

Whether it is electronic access or printed text such as books; each time you search for any information for your topic you need to evaluate the source and information to see if it is what you need. On the internet, you need to consider the following in your evaluation:

Number: The total number of sources retrieved by your search. Try to use Boolean logic to narrow your search down to exactly what you need for your topic. If you get too many and the sources are not relevant to you, revise your search until you get the information you require. For this you need to scan and skim quickly the information from various sources.

Relevance: Once you have your sources, you will also need to SELECT the sources that provide the relevant information to your topic.

Reasons to include information

- Written by a well known author in the subject area
- It has illustrations, data, graphs etc. that may be of use in your topic
- It has facts and opinions that you need
- Explains with examples
- It is easy for you to understand
- The website was updated recently

Reasons not to include the information

- It is not by a well known author
- It may not have what you need for your topic
- It's difficult for you to understand
- Does not give many examples
- It does not give any new information other than what you already know
- Out of date

Once you have selected the sources you need you will need to EVALUATE the information for its reliability and credibility. Regardless of the format in which you seek your information, you should check for the following

Authority

Is the information written by an author related to the profession/subject they are writing about? Is the organisation or institution related or involved in some way with the subject you are researching? This is important as it tells you if the information in the source is reliable. Any one can write or give an opinion about a subject, but only a person who has knowledge and is involved with the work can write with credibility in the language of the subject, i.e., use technical vocabulary associated with the subject.

Accuracy

Evaluating relative accuracy is an important skill in deciding the reliability of information. It is easier to evaluate facts for accuracy than for opinions, ideas or interpretations by other

people. Therefore it is important to corroborate and compare with similar sources of information. Here are some pointers:

- Watch out for quotations from other known people in the subject area or the citations given to back up arguments. They prove that the person writing the information has read widely and is knowledgeable about the topic and its current state of affairs.
- If acronyms are used, they are clearly explained at the beginning or within the document or with a glossary.
- Make note of the use of similar language plus keywords, they should match in all the information sources you select.
- Practical arguments are backed up with proven theories; experiments which can be repeated with same results proving the reliability of the information.
- Information is free from logical fallacies, i.e., it is not misleading or biased.

Coverage

Coverage of a topic and evaluating it makes sure that your arguments are provided based on a wider selection of opinions and information. Things you should consider are:

- Are most of the keywords you are looking for in the information sources you have selected?
- Does it present the pros and cons on the topic you have selected?
- Does the information provide an overview plus in depth information as the article progresses?

Currency

On any source of information, you need to get the most recent developing research and arguments on a on a topic. To do this you should be aware of:

- When was the selected information source produced?
- When it was last updated? (The date indicates the currency).