

Evaluating sources

Beginning your research

First, make sure you understand your assignment:

What is the topic?

How many sources are required? (Try to get more than are required!)

What will the final product be?

Then, ask yourself the following questions:

What do I know about the topic?

What are the most common or “key” terms that represent the topic?

Next, think about what kinds of sources are going to contain information on your topic. The library offers you a variety of information resources, falling into several categories: books, articles, and databases. Each of these is available in print and online and offers very different types of information. All of these are available on the library’s web page:

<http://academics.tctc.edu/lynx>

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Online encyclopedias

As you use these sources, you will need to analyze the information you find to ensure that it fits your research need. Ask yourself these questions to determine if each source is appropriate and responds to the requirements of your assignment:

What is the scope of the source?

“Scope” describes the source’s extent and range of coverage on a particular topic. Some books deal with one small aspect of a topic, such as “Small Animal Dentistry.” Other books are comprehensive in coverage, such as “Merck Veterinary Manual”.

Is the source timely?

Does the currency of the source match the timeliness of your topic? When researching the latest topics, try to use the most up-to-date materials available. Unless you need the history of your topic or are reading a classic in the field, you can probably find information from the past five to ten years.

Is it a primary or secondary source?

Primary sources are items created to communicate first-hand observations, investigations, or original ideas. Examples would be statistical data, historical documents, research reports, art & literary works, policy statements, court proceedings, official publications, and websites of organizations.

Secondary sources examine studies that others have made of a subject.

What is the author’s bias?

Bias is the author’s point-of-view, which can prejudice the information presented. Bias can be seen in the author’s writing style, word choice, or supporting evidence. Is the language objective and neutral, or is it opinionated and emotional? Effective researchers remain aware of an author’s bias, and often seek multiple points of view to obtain a more balanced picture of the research topic.

What are the author’s qualifications?

Does the author have any education, training, experience, or special expertise in the field of study? Can you find information about the author on the website of the organization or institution they represent? Is that organization or institution reputable?

A note about using the Internet

While there is plenty of good, reliable information available on the internet, there is also much biased, outdated, and untrustworthy information on the web.

Finding reliable sources can be difficult, because anyone can publish anything on the Internet. If you use information from the web, make sure to apply the criteria above to that source as well.