

## Comparing and Evaluating Information Sources

**Purpose:** When doing research you want to make sure the information you find comes from reliable sources. Learning to identify reliable information sources is an important skill. Writing down short answers to the questions in this guide will help you see if an information source is appropriate to use for your research paper.

**Instructions:** Before you begin, you should already have prepared a research question. If you have not, complete the guide “Developing a Good Research Question” first, which can be found on the Writing for Research website. Gather some information sources you think could help answer your question (you may want to ask a librarian for assistance). In the grid on the next page write brief responses in the “Information Source” column. Use additional print-outs of this page to evaluate additional information sources.

First, take a moment to consider some information sources that are available to you.

*Library Reference Materials.* These are the encyclopedia, almanacs, dictionaries, text books, and other materials found on your library’s reference shelves. Reference materials are a great place to learn basic information on a topic. The information found in reference materials is considered authoritative, meaning it can be trusted. Reference materials usually must stay at the library, and cannot be checked out.

*Library Books in Circulation.* There are a wide variety of books available for checkout in most libraries. Whether a book is a good resource for your paper will depend on your assignment and your research question. Pay close attention to what kind of book you are getting. It is fiction or non-fiction? It is based on someone’s opinion, or on research? Does it come from an academic publisher? You may want to get some guidance from a librarian or your instructor if you are unsure about a certain book.

*Wikipedia.* This is a popular online community-edited encyclopedia. Although studies have shown Wikipedia to generally be a reliable source of information, it is not a good idea cite Wikipedia in a research paper. The information on Wikipedia can be edited by anyone, and it may take time for errors and false information to be removed. When using Wikipedia, always check that the information you find is confirmed in other sources, and do not cite Wikipedia pages in a research paper.

*Scholarly Journals.* These are collections of peer-reviewed articles written by professional scholars. There are many journals on many topics available through your library. Reviewers look carefully at these articles before they can be published so they are a good source of reliable information. Many of these journals are written for a particular academic discipline, and they might assume you are already familiar with particular concepts and terminology in that field.

*Newspapers and Magazines.* These are journalistic publications, and can vary significantly in their scope and content. Professional journalism may report facts, or it may present opinion and commentary, depending on the style and intention of the publication. Although journalism is generally subject to fact-checking and editing, the reputation and value placed on journalistic work varies from publication to publication.

*Blogs and websites.* Blogs and websites are very diverse. They may be casual, such as someone’s personal journal, or professional, such as a science blog maintained by university faculty. In all cases, these are not subject to the same kinds of reviews that professional publications are, and the reliability of the information will vary from website to website. Consider how professional a blog or website appears to be, the credentials of the author, and if they provide evidence in support of any claims.

	Information Source
What type of information source is it?	
Give a title, and a short description of the information source if needed	
When was the source published or last updated? It may be important to make sure the information you cite is up to date.	
How is the source relevant to your research question?	
How reliable do think this information source is? (Use the descriptions above for guidance)	
Does it make any arguments?  If so, does it support them by offering evidence or citations?	
Review your answers above. Do you think this is a good source of information for your paper? Why or why not?	