

How to Evaluate Resources

Introduction

The following guide will help you to evaluate the value of any resource to any search, not just academic ones, and not just within our resources. While the precise mechanisms/buttons might not be the same, the design of these things has come to be somewhat universal. However, we will be using our counselling resource Databases as an example in this case.

Searching Basics

The first thing to do is to search for what you're interested in. This will require you picking a search term. This is a more detailed topic for another time, but the basics of it are to identify the major topic that you want to learn about, and then add or takeaway key words until it is broad or narrow enough that your results are about your topic. The more words you add the less results you'll get. Less words = more results.

Many curated databases also have 'limiters' or 'filters' that allow you to make sure the results of your search fit into a specific category. For instance 'Held by a specific library', 'Full text available to read', or 'written in English'. These can also help to make sure the results you're getting are what you want, but remember, most limiters will take the results you found in that search and reduce them to ones that are relevant to you, sometimes by a lot. If you make a new search you may need to reapply limiters.

- Pick the Keyword for your topic
 - Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (48,999 results)
- Broadening and narrowing search
 - Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Mental Health Counselling (1 result)
 - Cognitive Behavioural Therapy Metal Health (479 results)
- Limiters (full text)

Evaluating a Resource's Relevance

The most important thing to figure out when looking at your results is whether or not a resource is actually relevant to you. Is it about what you're interested in? Did your keywords work? Below are some tips to help judge how useful a resource will be.

Please remember that 'this resource affirms my preconceived idea' or 'this resource has the perfect quote that I want to use' is NOT an appropriate measure of whether a resource is relevant or not.

- How do you know if the resource you've found is one you want?
 - Look at the title of the resource and judge if it's keywords/vocabulary match what you were trying to learn about
 - Look at subjects or topics and do the same
 - Consider using some of the best terms as new search keywords to help find better results
 - If it's a book, take a look at the table of contents to see if it has chapters specific to your subject
 - Open the resource and read a little bit of it
 - Judge the language- is it too simplistic? Too complicated? Too technical?
 - A resource isn't going to help you if you're not understanding what you're reading, or if the effort you're going to have to put in to understand it is more than the time you have.

Evaluating a Resource's Worth: The Basics

Okay, so you've found a resource that seems relevant- great! Now it's time to judge whether it's a 'good' resource. 'Good' or 'Bad' resources aren't a black and white concept, it is a sliding scale, but there are a number of factors to consider when you're making a decision as to whether or not you should use this resource. Here's a quick overview of some questions you should ask yourself about the resource before committing to using it.

- Quick things to consider when Evaluating Resources
 - Relevance
 - These are the basic step we discussed above, because there's no point evaluating a resource further if you don't actually need to use it.
 - Authority
 - Is the person who wrote this qualified to know about on this subject?
 - Purpose
 - Why was the resource created?
 - To engage in scholarly discourse?
 - To advertise something?
 - To convert others to a certain point of view?
 - Format
 - How professional does it look? (Unprofessional resources can be useful, but this is an easy way to judge something at a glance)
 - What steps did someone have to go through to get this information published?
 - Peer review process?
 - Post it? (No steps other than typing their own thoughts?)

- Currency
 - Was it published a century ago? A decade? Is it current?
 - Does it matter for your subject matter? How fast does the information that you're talking about go out of date?
- Documentation
 - Did they cite their sources (formally or not)? Do you know where they got their ideas from? Are those sources sound?
 - Are their sources diverse, or all they only taking information from sources who fit into one particularly category or way of thought?

Evaluating Resources: Authority

Evaluating Authority is probably the most important factor after relevance, and sadly one of the most skipped steps in our world today. But think about it, would you take medical advice from a 6 year old? What about your next door neighbor who works as a mechanic? Someone who went to university to study computer science? A doctor? It's possible that any of these people might have other factors that means their medical opinion is more informed than a quick descriptor might make it sound, but being sure that the person producing the resource has the qualifications and knowledge of the subject area behind them to back up their claims is important.

- Is an author clearly identified, or is the information anonymous?
- Google the author
 - What do the results look like? Professional publications? Reputable news articles? What do other people have to say about this person?
- Consider if the author has authority to be writing about this. Have they studied it? Have lived experience of it? Or are they just sharing an opinion about it without that authority?
- Consider what the author is an expert in. Is it actually related to the subject they're writing about?
- Does the author have any organizational affiliations that might lend credence to the fact that they know about what they're talking about?
- Have they written other resources on this topic?
- Does what they're saying make sense?

Evaluating Resources: Purpose/Bias

Asking yourself 'why was this resource produced' is another important step. Consider advertising- if we took all ads at their face value we'd never stop buying things that would make us 'happy'. But we instinctively know that these things are created for the purpose of selling us things, and so we take ads with a grain of salt in our consideration of the information they are sharing with us.

All resources have a purpose, not just ads, but sometimes that purpose can be more or less hidden. This evaluation step can be especially important for information found

through google or other non-curated sources, though if you're finding information through a curated source (the news) you should probably ask these questions about the curators as well.

- Why does this piece of information exist?
 - To inform? Educate?
 - To persuade? Sell?
 - To entertain? Get someone to continue watching?
- Is the presenter or information trying to be objective or not? Does it present alternative points of view fairly, and discuss them, or does it ridicule them out of hand?
- Did the author make their intentions clear, or are they hiding them behind pretending a different purpose? (Example: Are book reviews there to tell you about what's in the book (inform) or to get you to buy the book (sell)?)
- Does the author have any organizational affiliations that might bias them, or which have a specific 'party line' on this topic?
- Did this resource make anyone money? If so, who?

Evaluating Resources: Format

I know you've been told not to judge a book by its cover, but honestly, what a resource looks like can tell you a lot about it. Is the resource you're looking at crammed full of ads around the information? You might want to consider that the information itself is another way to get money. Are there a bunch of spelling mistakes or weird grammar? Maybe question whether the author really has good authority on the topic if it seems like there was no editor to correct things. If a resource doesn't look professional that might give a clue that there are other aspects of evaluation that it might not get a stunning grade on.

It's important to note that this is NOT the first and only tool of evaluation you should use. There are LOTS of resources out there where money and time has been put in to make them pass our invisible 'this looks good' standard, and so you should still judge them by the other criteria in this document. Do judge a book by its cover, but not ONLY by that.

- How professional does it look?
 - Less of a problem when you're viewing a curated database like our online journals, more of a website thing.
- What steps did someone have to go through to get this information published?
 - Peer review – means that other scholars in this field read the work and evaluated it to be useful to expanding the knowledge or scholarly conversation.
 - Did it go through a publicity office?
 - Or was all that was needed for it to get published for someone to hit send on twitter?

Evaluating Resources: Currency

This matters more or less depending on what subject you're interested in. Do you want to know the newest, most popular book to read? The bestseller list from 1960 might not be what you need. Want to know how the immune system works? Considering we're studying and updating our knowledge all the time newer might be better. Analysing a particular bible passage? While cultural opinions might have changed over time, the core of the bible hasn't much, so you might be okay with an older resource.

- Does it matter how long ago it was published for your purposes? Is there an 'out of date'?
 - Oddly less useful in the context of biblical studies (aka a subject with a REALLY long history and one major text that hasn't changed that much) but still very important for counselling.
 - Science is always evolving and so currency is very important for that.

Evaluating Resources: Documentation

And THIS is why we teach you to cite. Knowing where information comes from, what they read (or that they did do any reading/research at all) to come to conclusions is very important. If I write an essay saying that whales are fish and my only source is the novel 'Moby Dick' that's very different than if I'm citing the latest academic study that redefines the categories of animals after intense research. (I might still be wrong, but you know where I'm getting my ideas from.)

And a resource without any documentation of where it's getting it's ideas from? It's not unreasonable to assume they're being made up from the author's head, and while that head might be highly qualified good information is made up through sharing and discussion with other knowledgeable peers.


- Does this source have documentation? Can you easily see where they're getting their information or ideas from?
- Does this source reflect diversity in viewpoints?
 - Are there alternative viewpoints discussed?
 - Are other source of information all from the same category?
 - Multiple genders?
 - Socioeconomic backgrounds?
 - Ethnicities? Cultures?

Lastly, you've heard 'don't cite wikipedia'? Here's why citing community moderated sources can get you inaccurate information (from xkcd, <https://xkcd.com/978/>)

WHERE CITATIONS COME FROM:


CITOGENESIS STEP #1:
THROUGH A CONVOLUTED PROCESS, A USER'S BRAIN GENERATES FACTS. THESE ARE TYPED INTO WIKIPEDIA.

THE "SCROLL LOCK" KEY WAS DESIGNED BY FUTURE ENERGY SECRETARY STEVEN CHU IN A COLLEGE PROJECT.



A RUSHED WRITER CHECKS WIKIPEDIA FOR A SUMMARY OF THEIR SUBJECT.

US ENERGY SECRETARY STEVEN CHU, (NOBEL PRIZEWINNER AND CREATOR OF THE UBIQUITOUS "SCROLL LOCK" KEY) TESTIFIED BEFORE CONGRESS TODAY...



STEP #2

SURPRISED READERS CHECK WIKIPEDIA, SEE THE CLAIM, AND FLAG IT FOR REVIEW. A PASSING EDITOR FINDS THE PIECE AND ADDS IT AS A CITATION.

GOOGLE IS YOUR FRIEND, PEOPLE.


<REF>{{CITE WEB|URL=



STEP #3

STEP #4

NOW THAT OTHER WRITERS HAVE A REAL SOURCE, THEY REPEAT THE FACT.



REFERENCES PROLIFERATE, COMPLETING THE CITOGENESIS PROCESS.

Practice Resource Evaluation

We have 2 resources to practice evaluating on. Click on the link and consider each category for yourself before taking a look at my evaluations.

- Relevance
- Authority
- Purpose
- Format
- Currency
- Documentation

- <https://www.dhmo.org/facts.html>
 - Relevance:
 - This is a practice example, so let's assume that it is relevant.
 - Authority:
 - 'Tom Way' copyrighted it way down at the bottom
 - Google says he's a computer science professor which... doesn't seem to have much to do with this chemistry stuff
 - Other articles do talk about him and Di-hydrogen Monoxide
 - He is on google scholar
 - Purpose:
 - Warning about the dangers of Dihydrogen Monoxide
 - Convert others to certain point of view
 - Format:
 - Not terribly professional looking. Old.
 - They had to make their own website for this with the effort of making a page, but there doesn't seem to have been a peer review process (there usually isn't for websites)
 - Currency:
 - No published Date but looks old.
 - Documentation:
 - Does link to some other websites which... have a suspiciously similar style
 - Does not provide any sources on any specific information.
 - Verdict?
 - Probably not a good source.
 - (Background knowledge) Di-hydrogen Mono-oxide is actually just the chemical name for water, and this website was created as a parody to help teach how to think critically about what you're reading

- <https://login.ezproxy.acabc.talonline.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=152768994&site=ehost-live>
 - Relevance:
 - This is a practice example, so let's assume that it is relevant.
 - Authority:
 - Has author affiliations on the information page, all related to medicine schools in Japan
 - Not anonymous, provides contact information up front
 - Upon googling, the first author (at least) has other publications and claims to be interested in the field on his professional about me page
 - Purpose:
 - Inform people about the results of studies on a specific topic
 - Format:
 - Scholarly journal format, looks very formal
 - Currency:
 - Published in 2021
 - Documentation:
 - List of 20 references, most of which look to be other academic papers
 - Verdict?
 - Looks good!
 - You can always go deeper in evaluating, so it's up to you where you feel comfortable stopping.