

CITY OF GLASGOW
COLLEGE

Evaluating information

LIBRARY SERVICES

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City of Glasgow College Libraries



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Introduction

The amount of information available to us today is vast. In fact, there is often too much to choose from, and it can vary in quality. Because of this, the ability to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of information is crucial to successful research. The following guide provides advice to readers on evaluating information gleaned from online and offline sources.

Books

Generally speaking, books are evaluated by an editorial process before publication. However, with the emergence of vanity publishers (people publishing their own book) and politically/religiously motivated publishers, there is a need for caution. As library collections purposely include publications expressing a range of viewpoints, it is not safe to assume that librarians will filter out non-authoritative works (i.e. those which may not contain completely reliable information).

Check for the following:

Author: Usually listed on the title page. Sometimes a publication will contain a brief biographical note on the author.

Publisher: Listed on title page. *Is this a mainstream publisher?* If in doubt ask a librarian or check for a publisher's website online.

Date of publication: Again, listed on title page, or the reverse of the title page. *Is the information up-to-date?* Remember, it can take eighteen months or more to bring a publication to press. During that time the information may have become dated or superseded, depending upon the dynamic nature of the subject. Ancient history is less likely to change as much as a subject such as law or politics.





Even in the case of less dynamic subjects, check if the date of publication refers to a reprint of a previous publication and, if so, whether this has included updates to the information itself.

Purpose/Audience: *Why was the publication published?* Read the introduction and preface. These will reveal the motivation of the author. Are they presenting an objective (neutral) account or is their point of view skewed somehow?

Reviews: *Is there a review of the book available?* Ask a librarian or conduct an Internet search on either the author or book title.

Newspapers/Periodicals/Journals

Apply similar checks as for books. In the case of newspapers, note the journalist's name. Quality newspapers employ staff writers with expertise in certain areas that they cover. Newspapers like The Guardian employ environmental specialists, health and safety specialists and so on.

Invariably, newspapers tend to incline one way politically or another, and may campaign on specific issues. They can present facts with an interpretation that is just that - an interpretation. *Do not accept interpretation as fact, rather than a reasoned argument.* This is what commentators refer to as "spin".

Periodicals often deal with specific subjects and may have built up authority over a number of years. Some may be campaigning publications dealing with specific issues of concern to groups of people. As such, their motivation is both open and obvious.





Professional bodies, such as the Law Society of Scotland, for example, may publish periodicals. These should present no problems as regards authority, accuracy and objectivity.

Scholarly journals – often connected to a named university – should present no problem, as articles usually undergo expert peer review, ensuring authority.

Websites

There are many potential pitfalls with websites. The Internet is the least-filtered information source in the world. *Anyone may create a website on any topic, regardless of their lack of knowledge on the topic or the purity of their motives.*

Personal, business and marketing websites may be retrieved during a search. Selecting appropriate web sources is, therefore, very important to the researcher.


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Websites are created within specific **domains**. The last part of a site's URL indicates its domain. Take the example, *www.gla.ac.uk* where 'ac.uk' denotes an academic institution or service. Generally, this is a good way to determine the authority of the web site originator, but always look for more guarantees that material is reliable.

Other domains include:

.edu	educational institution
.com	commercial venture
.org	organisation
.gov	government body





Date of creation and last revision are very important in determining the usefulness of a web site – just how old is the material you are looking at?

Content speaks for itself: if you find a website that deals with stress relief and relaxation alongside racist propaganda, then you may form your own opinion as to its purpose, authority and veracity.

The development of wikis and Wikipedia in particular further highlights the need for evaluation of information. Wikipedia is a free online encyclopaedia, written by those who actually use it. Other users may further edit articles posted on Wikipedia. By their nature, *Wikis lend themselves to abuse and unintentional insertion of inaccurate information into the information environment.* Opinion may be presented as fact, and there are numerous incidences of inaccurate information being posted maliciously on Wikipedia.

For further information on Wikipedia, see the Library's *Wikipedia guide*.