CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING INFORMATION SOURCES

Currency
If you need up-to-date information, be sure that you check the currency of the material. Check the publication date or revision date.

References
Look for a "notes" or "references" section to see if the source documents where information or data was pulled from for the source.

Scope and Purpose
Check a table of contents (or the index of a book) to see if it covers the information you need. Scan the introduction, for more clues to a source's content and purpose.

Level
Determine the audience for which something was written. Read some selected passages. Is it at the level appropriate for your purposes? Is it too elementary or too technical?

Publishing Information
If you need scholarly materials, use books published by well-known, respected firms or by university presses. Also check the publication history, usually found on the reverse of the title page. If the book has had many editions, it is probably an important work in your field. Web site sources have slightly different criteria, below.

Author
Check authors' credentials. What is their background? Are they well-known in the field? What other writings have they published? These questions can be answered by using biographical sources and Googling the name.

Book reviews can also give important information concerning an author and the opinion other scholars have of him and his works. If you need a scholarly perspective, be sure to use reviews published in scholarly journals rather than popular magazines.

Periodicals
To evaluate a periodical, you must determine if it is suitable for the type of information you need. There are general information magazines, trade or business journals, and scholarly journals. A scholarly or academic journal has the following characteristics:

- It is often published by a learned society or professional organization.
- It usually publishes original research.
- It is usually published quarterly or monthly rather than weekly.
- It is usually a "refereed" journal, which means an independent expert assists the editor in evaluating the articles submitted for publication-- a process called "peer review".
- Scholarly articles have footnotes and references of works cited-- this is the single most important visual clue.

Web Sites
Check the origin of the site. Look for "About" pages that describe the source. Who stands behind it and what do they have to lose if they are wrong? In a URL, .org is for organizations, mostly non-profit. .edu is education, .gov is government. These tend to be the most reliable sources. Google Scholar limits searches to sites with these extensions.
.com is commercial and you need to look at what interests are involved and how much they are influenced by their commercial interests and/or a particular agenda. ~ sites are personal Web pages and require much care.
The two hardest parts for most people doing a literature search are: 1) finding a workable topic to start with, and; 2) knowing when you have done enough. The purpose of this guide is to give you a general strategy and some search tactics.

There are any number of ways to search for literature on a topic. The most common way in academia is to ask scholars to recommend sources, which uses their expertise to focus quickly on relevant material. You should not hesitate to take advantage of such valuable resources.

Another approach is to search more generally by using library tools for searching subjects and topics. Most libraries arrange materials by subject, or give access to material in a way that can be searched by subject. It takes more time to search by subject, but chances are you will find good related material you might ignore or overlook if you are searching for specifically recommended titles.

Follow the Scholarly Publication Chain

A good place to start a project is to think about the broader context that would include a topic or an area you are interested in. A library is an excellent place to explore ideas you have which are not fully formed. You do not have to start off by knowing exactly what you are looking for.

Because recorded knowledge comes to exist in the world in predictable ways, there are reference tools in the library that will quickly give you a good idea about how much research has been done on a topic.

The standard way accepted knowledge enters almost all scholarly disciplines goes from the new, most disputed theories presented through informal networks of scholars to the most accepted facts and opinions. The chain of publication reflects this process, and it never hurts to reverse the process when you are starting on a new area to insure that you are covering the range of possibilities. A sketch of the publication chain follows:

Encyclopedias The most accepted fact, opinions, dates, and names end up in articles in encyclopedias. The articles are often written by prominent scholars to provide an overview of a field and should give you a sense of how much research has been done at least by the amount of space dedicated to a topic or area. A good article will end with a bibliography of the key books and articles of which you should be aware. This makes for a good foundation.

Books Book-length treatments of a topic are likely to offer the most detail. But detail sacrifices timeliness. Keep in mind that it often takes 18 months at a minimum to bring out a book once an author has finished writing, particularly from a scholarly press. Even a book just out has aged a bit in the process of publication.

Articles New knowledge often appears first in periodicals, and, if it is to be considered scholarly, should appear first only in a peer-reviewed periodical.

However, magazine and newspaper articles on scholarship are often a good way to find out about and understand new ideas.

Internet Resources The Web can be used to find out informally the ideas generating the most interest. Blogs and listservs, are some places to look. Reliable full-text sources can be found for free, particularly from the government, but check your sources carefully on the Web.

Some scholarship will appear on the Web for free, but this is generally not the case for articles published in journals. Use what you find as a springboard for more searching, rather than an end in itself.