



Evaluating Information

With the many sources of information we have available to us now, we often find ourselves with too much information. We need some way to sort through it all. We need to know what sort of questions to ask to determine whether the information available will adequately answer our questions. At each stage of an individual's research, different questions need to be asked. Some guidelines are given here.

Before you start searching, define your information need.

What information do you need? Define your problem or interpret your assignment.

What information do you already have on the subject? What facts or background information do you know?

Do you want general or specific information about the subject?

How much information do you want? A single fact, a paragraph, a few pages, a whole book?

What types of information do you want? Opinions, statistics, case studies, names, historical information, analysis?

What information sources (indexes, abstracts, books, encyclopedias, etc.) will help you find the information you need? (A reference librarian can help with this question!)

Evaluate the source of the information.

Who is the author or producer of the information, and what qualifications do they have on this subject? What is their relevant education, experience, occupation, or other publications?

Who is the intended audience? The general public, students, professionals, etc.?

What type of source is it? Is it scholarly, popular, governmental, or private? Is the presentation suitable for your level of understanding of the subject, that is, not too simple nor too difficult?

When was the information produced? Is your topic one that is likely to have had significant changes since the source was published? Do you need current information or an historical perspective?

Where was the information published? Does it focus on a specific part of the world or region?

Why was the information published? Does the source show political or cultural bias?

How is the information organized? Are there appendixes, indexes, and/or a bibliography included? Does it have graphs, charts, glossaries, or illustrations to help explain or augment the information?

Some questions can be answered while you are looking in a database or index. Know the content of the databases, read abstracts (if available), do author searches, look at subject headings, and notice publication information (for dates, places, and publishers). Other questions will be answered when you have the publication in hand.

Evaluate the information content.

Does the source contain the information you need?

Does it report primary research (e.g. experiments, observations, surveys) or is it a compilation of previous research, like a review article? Is there documentation of other works used (bibliography, footnotes, etc.)?

What is the author's thesis? What are the main points or concepts?

What facts or opinions are presented? Is more than one point of view presented? What are the major findings or conclusions, and are they supported by the facts or arguments?

Do other sources support the facts and/or conclusions of the source? Do the findings support or refute your ideas on the topic?

Finally, after you have read through a book, an article, or other publication, you should be able to answer questions about the type and quality of information that it gives.

Please feel free to consult with reference librarians about evaluating sources of information.

The phone number for the Carlson Library Information/Reference Desk is: 530-2324.