

# PREPARING FOR UNIVERSITY AND YOUR STUDIES

## How to Evaluate Internet Sources



### Evaluating internet sources

It is particularly important to evaluate the reliability of web-based sources before using them in your academic assignments.

It is important to consider who wrote the information. As anyone can create web-based information, it is vital to apply the authority test: Is the writer an expert? If the author cannot be determined, it may be best not to trust the information.

#### Check the domain:

Government .gov	Commerical .com	Education .edu
Organisation .org	Academic .ac	Network .net

The domains .gov, .edu, and .ac. can only be used by registered government and educational institutions, therefore they indicate a higher level of reliability than .com, .org and .net sites.

Wikipedia includes a wide range of information which may be useful to help your initial understanding of a topic. It may also provide references and links to further reading but it should not be referenced in an academic assignment.

### Synthesising evidence

When you are writing your academic essay, everything you write must be supported with evidence from a range of sources. The skill as a writer is to integrate the evidence so that it is developed into a convincing argument.

If you want to improve the quality of your writing you should synthesise the evidence from different sources.

Synthesising is the skill by which you summarise similar ideas from more than one source of information.

You could use a single statement with multiple authors to show that you have read a particular idea or statement in several sources.

For example: In contrast, the deep ecology movement calls for cultural and political change at the most fundamental levels of society, in order to address the root causes of ecological destruction (*Devall & Sessions, 2015; Naess, 2005*).

You can also compare and contrast different writers' ideas, thinking or theories; show how writers agree or disagree and to what extent.

### Unsure whether a source is suitable to use in your assignment?

#### How to evaluate and use sources...

- Why is evidence necessary?
- Scholarly vs non-scholarly
- Brick's 5 tests for reliability
- Primary vs secondary sources
- Evaluating internet sources
- Synthesising evidence



## Why is reliable evidence necessary?

At university you are required to understand the literature available in your area and use it within your assignment by presenting a critical response to the essay question.

You need to present an opinion based on your critical reading ideas of others. Using references demonstrates your range of reading and understanding of the research, theory and practice in relation to the assignment topic.

Therefore, you need to spend time choosing good sources to show your understanding of the topic area.

## Scholarly vs non-scholarly sources

### Scholarly sources:

- Discipline specific rather than written in language for the general public
- Written by experts in the area
- Include detailed information which may be of interest to specialists in the area
- Written in an academic style with referencing either footnote or endnote or in-text

### Non-scholarly sources:

- Often published in daily, weekly or popular sources
- Usually give broader and less detailed information
- Written in a style that anybody could follow
- May include advertising and often do not include references

To help you select suitable sources apply Brick's (2006) 5 reliability tests:

### Authority Test

Is the author an expert (eg from a university or research based institution or a professional in the area)?

Is the source of information peer reviewed?

### Audience Test

Who is the audience? General public, professional or academic?

### Currency Test

Is the information up-to-date? Is the information still relevant and valid? Just because a source is old, this does not mean it is no longer relevant: if writers are still referring to the source it could be a seminal text.

### Transparency Test

Is the research methodology clearly presented to the reader?

What evidence is provided?

Where does it come from?

Can data collection and data analysis be checked?

Is there a comprehensive reference list or bibliography?

### Objectivity Test

Is the source of information objective?

What is the purpose of writing?

For a scholarly purpose?

For advertising?

Is there a hidden agenda?

Who funded or supported the research?

## Primary vs secondary sources

**Primary sources** are original research that the author has personally collected and analysed. It could include:

- Scientific experiments
- Data collected from surveys, interviews, questionnaires or through observation
- Original ideas expressed in reports, speeches etc.

**Secondary sources** are when an author uses other researchers' ideas or data. However, it is often better to look at the original research rather than relying on what someone else has said about it, particularly if you are a postgraduate student.