Introduction

When discovering information sources for your university work there are a wide range of options available to you. You can choose scholarly sources like textbooks and journals, or popular sources like newspapers and webpages.

No matter what you choose the next step is to evaluate the information that you have found. Ask questions of each document to assess how you will use it. This will allow you to develop a questioning mind-set, perfect for evaluating documents and useful for any critical thinking exercise.

What follows is a list of questions that you may want to think about when evaluating your document. The questions you consider will vary depending on the type of information, and the requirements of your assignment/discipline.

What is it?

Double check the document is what you think it is. Not everything you find in a literature search is a full journal article, for instance.

- Is it relevant?
  First read the abstract / introduction / conclusion to confirm that the document is relevant to your topic.

- Is it an appropriate piece of information for you? Who is the intended audience? Is it popular or scholarly? Remember popular sources can be useful; they often reflect public opinion about a topic and can be good for any comparisons that you might want to make.

- What is the purpose of a piece of information? Why has it been created?
  Be sceptical and cynical about the motives of the creators.

- Is it too technical, or too basic? What type of language is used?

- Is it an overview or an opinion, the results of one piece of research, or a literature review?

- Has the information been checked in any way? E.g. peer-review.

What is in it?

Compare what the author is saying to what you already know. Is it objective or biased? It isn't always easy to judge - everyone has attitudes and previous experiences which might affect their point of view.

- Are statements backed up by evidence?

- Is the evidence used backed up by references?

- Are the references used appropriate? Are they current?

- Are the conclusions in line with other pieces written on the topic?

- Is there a piece of information that you feel is missing? Why?

Who created it?

These questions may lead you to uncover bias or subjectivity in the document.

- Is it clear who created it? (It may be harder to find out who created a website.)

- Are they experts in their field? (Citations can give an indication of the influence or reputation of an author.)

- Why have they created it? (Knowing the author's motivation can help you determine whether there is any bias to the information.)

- What else have they produced? Are they consistently promoting the same point of view?

- Does the creator work for a particular organisation?

- Who is it published by?

- Who is it funded by?

When was it created?

- How current is it? Check the publication date, or the 'last updated' date on a web page.

- How current is the information? The importance of this will vary depending on what you need the information for.

- How close to the event in question was this information written? (Is it a primary or secondary source?)

- Has the document been published in any other form or format?

- Has the information been superseded? Is there a later edition of a book, or more recent research? Have more recent articles cited this one?

- Why has this information appeared at this point in time? Is it a reaction to an event or another piece of research?

- How does it relate to other literature on the same topic?