

## Searching for information: Some hints and tips

### Having a first look at your topic

First of all you need to find out what resources are available to support the question you have been set. The best way to do this is to have a quick look on the Library Catalogue or to Google it.

- Pick out some words in the question to search the [Library Catalogue](#) and [Google](#)
- This will help you to do two things
  - Find out what information and resources are out there (enough, not enough or too much information?)
  - Help you to decide if there is a smaller aspect of your topic to concentrate on

You might find that there isn't enough material to support the topic you have chosen OR there may be too much stuff to select from.

If this happens, either go back to your question and chose a different set of words to search with or try a different question. You may need to do this several times to get a clear picture of what resources are available for you to use.

If you aren't sure about what sort of words to use in a search you can ask your subject librarian for help.

If you are using electronic resources you might also want to using connector words like AND, OR and NOT to develop a search which gives you really good results. These are known as Boolean operators. Using Boolean operators will make your searches much more powerful, but it can be a little tricky to know the best way to use these when you first start to use them. Have a look at the [Boolean Machine](http://kathyschrock.net/rbs3k/boolean/) (<http://kathyschrock.net/rbs3k/boolean/>) for some advice on how the operators work.

If after trying some searches with Boolean operators you are still having problems finding the type of information you want ask your subject librarian for help.

Once you are sure there are enough resources, start to look at the text of the information you have found and decide whether it supports your argument you want to make. Remember that what counts as "enough information" may vary from topic to topic or from one assignment to the next.

To help you decide whether the information you have found is useful you can use some simple evaluation criteria.

### **Ask yourself three things:**

- Is it relevant enough to your topic, in other words is it right on point or does it just mention your topic in passing?
- Is it reliable, that is, is it published by a reputable individual or organisation?
- Is it up-to-date, in other words does it reflect current thinking on your topic?

### **How do I decide which books to read?**

Between all of our libraries there are over 300,000 books to choose from! So, how do you decide which books are right for you? In short, it is down to you to evaluate a book, but here are a few things to look for...

- **Scope** - What is the purpose of the book - education, advertising, entertainment?
- **Breadth** - What aspects of the subject are covered? Is the book focused on a narrow area or does it include related topics?
- **Depth** - What is the level of detail provided about the subject? This may depend on the kind of audience for which the resource has been designed. The book could be aimed at A Level, undergraduate or postgraduate students for example.
- **Content** - Is the information fact or opinion?
- **Sources** - Are sources within the book listed so they can be verified?
- **Authority** - What is the authority, expertise or credentials of the author?
- **Currency** - When was the book last revised? This may give an indication of the book's durability.

## What type of information will help me?

When deciding what is the most appropriate type of information for a particular assignment there are a few things you need to consider:

- Primary v secondary sources
- Scholarly v General Interest
- Current v historical
- Factual/statistical information. This can be useful in providing evidence to back up argument.
- Where will I find information on my topic? Organisational websites, government websites.

Remember that the same type of information may not be relevant for every assignment – it may depend on the topic and what you have been asked to do by your tutor as to which type of information you need to look at.

**Primary sources** could be considered as "original" or "firsthand" sources.

- Journal articles, reports and conference papers which present the results of original research are termed primary literature whether they're in print or electronic format.
- Sets of data such as statistics and lab results are also primary sources as are documents produced at the time of an event e.g. diaries, photographs, court records, newspaper reports.

**Secondary sources** interpret, analyse or repackage primary material.

- Examples of secondary sources are textbooks and review articles. These aim to summarise and explain previously published work rather than present the results of original work.
- Abstracts, indexes, and databases are also secondary sources. These are used to identify relevant primary and secondary literature

## Make sure the information found fits your assignment

Whether the information you have is a book from a reading list, a journal article, a newspaper article or someone's web page you need to treat each with the same amount of caution when you use it.

### Ask yourself:

- Is it relevant to the question I need to answer,
- who wrote the piece,
- who published it,
- where did they get their information or data from,
- is the data up to date,
- is the work itself up-to-date,
- is it referenced, that is, has the author said where they obtained the information from,
- is it well written,
- who is it written for,
- is it plausible,
- do you think your tutor would think it is a sound piece of information?

For books (especially books on a reading list) this should be easy because they are published, well referenced and often recommended by a respected individual like a tutor or a librarian. It is not so easy for e-resources, especially web pages. Try looking at the companion guide on evaluating websites or come and see your subject librarian to get more help.

### Contact us

**Email:** [libraryhelpdesk@staffs.ac.uk](mailto:libraryhelpdesk@staffs.ac.uk)

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