

Finding and Evaluating Research Sources

What Web Search Engines Won't Find

When you use Google, Yahoo, or another Web Search Engine to find material on your research topic, you may think that you have found more than enough information to write your paper. But if you only search the Web for information that is available for free, you are missing very important Web resources that are *not free*.

As a Stevens Student you have access to many valuable resources such as **databases**, **electronic journals**, and **electronic books** that are not available to the general public.

For example, by using the databases that Stevens Institute of Technology subscribes to, you will have access to a wide variety of scholarly journals and professional association publications, resources that are reliable and authoritative. By not including databases in your research process, you may be omitting some of the very best resources on your topic.

The Public (the General Internet) vs. the Private Web (Stevens' Databases)

The Public Web, Available for Free

Anyone can publish anything

Information May Be:

- Unfiltered
- Unedited
- Unchecked

Information May Be Of Widely Differing Reliability

Examples of Free Information:

- The Web sites of scholarly professional societies, whose information is likely to be trustworthy.
- The Web sites of everyday people, sites that may or may not have reliable, trustworthy and up-to-date information on them.
- Web sites from advocacy organizations trying to sway your opinion, or commercial sites trying to sell you something.

The Private Web, Available for a Fee

Provides professional, scholarly and peer-reviewed articles

Information Has Been:

- Filtered
- Edited
- Selected

Much Of The Information Can Be Identified As Being Reliable

Examples of Fee-Based Information:

- Databases subscribed to by Stevens Institute of Technology such as Academic Search Premier, Lexis-Nexis and Scopus, that lead to a huge amount of Scholarly Literature.
- Electronic Journals and online versions of publications subscribed to by Stevens Institute of Technology, or included in the databases that Stevens subscribes to, such as *Science*, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, *History of Science*, and even newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times*.

Important Questions to Ask When Evaluating the Reliability of a Website

Note: The greater number of questions listed below answered "yes", the more likely it is you can determine whether the source is of high information quality.

Criterion #1: AUTHORITY

1. Is it clear what organization is responsible for the contents of the page?
2. Is there a link to a page describing the goals of the organization?
3. Is there a way of verifying the legitimacy of this organization? That is, is there a phone number or postal address to contact for more information? (Simply an email address is not enough.)
4. Is there a statement that the content of the page has the official approval of the organization?
5. Is it clear whether this is a page from the national or local chapter of the organization?
6. Is there a statement giving the organization's name as copyright holder?

Criterion #2: ACCURACY

1. Are the sources for any factual information clearly listed so they can be verified in another source? (If not, the page may still be useful to you as an example of the ideas of the organization, but it is not useful as a source of factual information).
2. Is the information free of grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors? (These kinds of errors not only indicate a lack of quality control, but can actually produce inaccuracies in information.)

Criterion #3: OBJECTIVITY

1. Are the organization's biases clearly stated?
2. If there is any advertising on the page, is it clearly differentiated from the informational content?

Criterion #4: CURRENCY

1. Are there dates on the page to indicate:
 - o When the page was written?
 - o When the page was first placed on the Web?
 - o When the page was last revised?
2. Are there any other indications that the material is kept current?

Criterion #5: COVERAGE

1. Is there an indication that the page has been completed, and is not still under construction?

2. Is it clear what topics the page intends to address?
3. Does the page succeed in addressing these topics, or has something significant been left out?
4. Is the point of view of the organization presented in a clear manner with its arguments well supported?

How to Identify a Scholarly Source

Contains: Articles or content that combines original ideas, advanced research and theory, meant to inform and challenge the reader.

Audience: Researchers, students and practitioners in or of a particular field of study.

Authors: Researchers who are always named and their credentials listed.

Traits: The articles are usually long, the methodologies for the study or analysis are described, citations are provided, the content is often peer reviewed* and a technical vocabulary is used.

* Peer reviewed articles are those that have been reviewed and accepted for publication in a journal by a selected panel of recognized experts in the field of study covered by that journal. Usually many of these reviewers are on the journal's Editorial Board.

Scholarly Journals versus Popular Magazines

Popular Magazine

Contains:
Reports on current events and fashionable topics meant to entertain the reader.

Audience:
The population in general and/or select segments of it.

Authors:
Journalists, frequently unnamed

Traits:
Articles are short, pictures and ads, no citations (sources), not peer reviewed, written for easy reading

Scholarly Journal

Contains:
Articles that combine original ideas, advanced research, and theory, meant to inform and challenge the reader.

Audience:
Researchers, students and practitioners in or of a particular field of study

Authors:
Researchers who are always named

Traits:
Long articles, methodologies described, citations, peer reviewed, technical vocabulary