LEAP Online

Learning Excellence Achievement Pathway Online Tutorial

How to Identify Reliable Information

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Introduction

Each day, we encounter what seems like limitless information. With social media posts, viral videos, emails, and news articles, there's a lot we can learn. Unfortunately, not everything we read is always truthful, and even the best detectives sometimes struggle to decipher what's accurate and what isn't.

No matter your programme of study, being well-informed and identifying reliable information are critical to understanding the world, communicating effectively, and establishing credibility. But what does it take to separate reliable from unreliable information? In this section, you'll learn the answer, uncovering what reliable information is, why it's important, and how to identify it.

What is Reliable Information?

The world is filled with biased, misleading, and incorrect information. Reliable information cuts through that noise. It comes from reliable sources that provide thorough, well-reasoned theories, arguments, facts, or discussions, based on solid evidence.

3 source categories

Reliable sources can vary depending on the type of information needed. Overall, sources usually fall into three categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Read through the sections below to learn more.

Primary

Primary sources come from individuals directly connected to an event. They offer first-hand accounts and provide original research, discovery, thought, or opinion.

Examples include:

- Official documents and records
- Photographs
- Newspapers and magazines
- Films and speeches

Secondary

As the name suggests, secondary sources are second-hand accounts of an event. These sources offer analysis, discussion, or review of a primary source.

Examples include:

- Documentaries
- Blog posts
- Textbooks
- Journal articles

Tertiary

Tertiary sources combine primary and secondary sources. They provide an overview or summary.

Examples include:

- Almanacs
- Dictionaries
- Encyclopaedia's
- Bibliographies

Other types of sources

Read below to explore examples of different sources you may choose to use in your assignment, together with descriptions of each. This also includes the advantages and disadvantages of these sources. The list isn't exhaustive.

Books

Printed, handwritten or digital work.

Advantages

- Often contains significant information
- Easily accessible via the library and Discover@Bolton

Disadvantages

- The author may have some personal bias within it
- Can be time consuming to sift through all of the information. Therefore, good reading strategies are needed to research effectively
- Books may become outdated quickly

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Journal articles

Usually a peer-reviewed source contains articles relating to a specific discipline or field of study.

Advantages

- If peer-reviewed, it is generally trustworthy
- Published regularly
- Easily accessible via the library and Discover@Bolton
- The University of Bolton has access to over a million journal articles

Disadvantages

- May need a subscription to access the content. Sometimes at a cost
- There may be a lot of content to sift through
- You may come across phrases, concepts and theories you are not familiar with

Websites

Online content that may include policies, reports and acts of parliament, etc.

Advantages

- Access to a lot of information, usually for free
- Access at any time, from anywhere

Disadvantages

There are a lot of unreliable websites. Therefore, you will need to critically appraise the source to see whether it's trustworthy

Grey literature

Literature that is not published, in the public domain, non-academic journals, other information, such as hospital policies (Aveyard, 2023)

Other examples include:

- Hospital pamphlets
- Clinical trials

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- Pre-print articles
- Conference papers
- Medical infographics
- Dissertations
- Blogs

Advantages

- Current information
- Quicker to issue
- Wider pool of resources and people to create content

Disadvantages

- Quality and reliability may vary
- No firm review process
- Not published, so access may be lost/taken away

Why is Reliable Information Important?

So, why should we bother separating the reliable from the unreliable? Ultimately, our ability to make decisions, communicate, and establish credibility as an academic writer is on the line if we don't. Read below to explore why.

Making informed decisions

Consuming inaccurate and unreliable information negatively impacts our ability to make important decisions around issues like health, finances, business, and education. On the other hand, reliable sources give us an accurate picture of what's going on, and we can use them to make informed decisions.

Communicating information

The use of email and social media makes it possible to spread information throughout the world in seconds. But clear and effective communication isn't just about exchanging information quickly. We also need to consider the information's quality. In academic writing you must communicate your ideas, opinions and stance clearly and this requires making valid points while providing accurate examples and evidence that the reader (i.e. the marking tutor) can easily follow and understand. This requires reliable sources.

Establishing credibility

Consuming and communicating inaccurate information in your work can lead to a reputation for sharing untrustworthy facts. Even if you don't intend to include false information/data, your motives may be questioned if you cite unreliable sources that

twist the truth. Remember, students who work with honesty, a key principle of academic integrity, can be believed in. When you double-check your sources, however, you increase your credibility. Sharing reliable information, citing credible sources, establishes you as honest and trustworthy.

Avoid confirmation bias. It's tempting to look for information that aligns with and confirms our existing beliefs, but ignoring accurate information because we disagree only hurts us in the long run. Remember, misinformation and confirmation bias are never helpful. We all have the right to our opinions, but we can't let them get in the way of facts.

How to Identify Reliable Information

During your time at university, you will need to engage with high-quality source material. However, with so much information at our fingertips, how do you know what's reliable? Not everything you read, particularly information found on the internet, is appropriate, relevant and reliable for academic study. Therefore, as you gather information, it's important that you examine it with a critical eye and judge what should and shouldn't be used. Beyond this, you should also think about additional questions you can ask to evaluate sources.

The CRAAP test

Beyond peer and editorial reviews, you should also review online resources, or any information collected for research. You can evaluate how reliable your sources are by using the CRAAP test, which is an acronym for evaluating the currency, reliability/relevance, authority, accuracy, and point-of-view.

Watch this video to find out more: The CRAAP Test Song [YouTube]

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For example, imagine that you're researching the safest routes to travel on land for your upcoming assignment and you've come across this source.

1. Currency

Is your source up to date? Information is often updated, revised, and sometimes no longer accurate. Time-sensitive topics need current information, although currency is less critical for historical references. Also, note that sources may not be current if they only mention days like "Today" or "Tuesday" and don't include a specific date and year.

2. Relevance

Is the source relevant to your research? Remember to search for sources that address the learning outcomes or your specific needs. This article compares cars and planes, not bicycles, so it isn't helpful for your research.

3. Authority

Is the author or publisher considered trustworthy in their field? Evaluate their credibility by looking for their expertise or reputation in a specific industry. When you search for this publisher, you won't find additional information about them as a credible source.

4. Accuracy

Is the information supported by evidence and cited correctly? Look for documented sources with specific facts and precise detail. This article doesn't list the name of the 'comprehensible study' referenced. What's more, it doesn't offer specific statistics or explain why driving is safer than flying.

5. Purpose

Why does this information exist? Think about the purpose or motive behind publishing this source. The most reliable sources explain or pass along information, rather than try to persuade or sway the audience. Technically, this article passes the purpose test, as it aims to educate.

The above article fails the CRAAP test. Its purpose seems legit, but that's the only box it checks. It's not current, relevant, or accurate, nor does the publisher have authority.

The more the merrier. Want to triple-check reliability? Research multiple reliable sources before determining if the information you receive is accurate or not. The more supporting sources you find, the better.

Summary

Reliable sources provide thorough, well-reasoned information based on solid evidence. This information can come from primary, secondary, or tertiary sources. When identifying reliable information, first ask yourself, 'Did this source go through some form of peer or editorial review?" Then, assess a source's credibility, to evaluate its authorship, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose.

Remember, your assignment must provide the reader with reliable information to demonstrate credibility to your ideas and opinions. By balancing your skills as an effective communicator and informed decision-maker, you'll avoid the trap of consuming and sharing misinformation.

Stay actively engaged. When evaluating the reliability of information, notice how the source presents and backs up details with supporting evidence. Reflect on your overall impression of the content's quality and identify if it's clear, concise, and something you can easily understand and communicate with others.

Reference List

Aveyard, H. (2023) Doing a literature review in health and social care: A Practical Guide. 5th ed. (Online] Maidenhead: Open University Press. Available from: https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bolton/reader.action?docID=30455029. [Accessed 6 November 2023].