

Chapter 9

Evaluating Information from the Web

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9.1 Introduction

The Web contains a great variety of information in diverse types of information sources. Much quality information is published online by reputable individuals and publishers and other organization as in the form of e-books, e-journals, e-magazines and e-newspapers, as well as research/technical reports, conference papers, theses, dissertations, etc. But there is also much average to very poor quality information that put out inexperienced or dubious people and organizations. The information may originate from authors who are experts on a subject or topic, but may also be from people who claim expertise but are not. People also publish information to the Web for various purposes, including to correctly inform or educate, or to misinform. Fake news is real on the Web, and so also is fake research claimed as genuine! Thus information users must beware. This chapter aims to improve your ability to properly evaluate any information that you obtain from Web and other sources before you use it.

9.2 Finding quality information

Most students nowadays prefer to use Web-based search engines like Google to search for information or information sources on the Web instead of using acquired print or subscribed or purchase electronic materials in the libraries of their institutions. Google and other search engines on the Web assist users with locating and indexing Web pages and other documents in their databases and thereafter enabling users to search the databases to find the pages or documents they want. This role of search engines is clearly valuable.

However, the numerous web pages and document that the search engine presents to you in response to your query (i.e. the keywords and phrases you typed into its search box) are usually not evaluated for quality of origin, purpose or content. The pages and documents are retrieved merely because they contain the key words and phrases you typed into the search box. So you must yourself determine if the information in each retrieved page or document is of adequate quality for your use.

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that highly specialized search engines like Google Scholar are much more careful in selecting web pages and documents for indexing in their databases than general search engines like Google or Yahoo. Thus, most of the pages and documents found through specialized search engines them are likely to be of high quality because they use special computer programmes to sift quality web pages and other documents that fit into their specialty from the Web for indexing in their databases. However, most of the quality documents provided by them are not available for free, but must be purchased or subscribed to at usually too high a cost for a student.

But there is a way out for students. What most students don't know is that the library of their institution performs a very valuable role that most search engines do not do. The role is that of carefully reviewing and evaluating numerous alternative sources of information (print books, electronic books, journals, reports, thesis, dissertations, etc.) before some are selected and acquired for addition to their collection. The library performs this role very carefully because the different types of documents they maintain in their collection cost a lot to acquire, while their available fund for acquiring them are very limited. In order words, the print documents that you find on library shelves, or the e-books, e-journals and other electronic documents you find during a search of the library's OPAC are more likely to contain good quality information than the freely accessible and downloadable documents that you find using general web search engines like Google or Yahoo.

Students, academics and researchers usually seek information for various academic and research purposes, and often do so using various Internet search engines such as Ask, Google,

Yahoo, etc. Among their objectives for seeking the information are:

- Seeing what is available by starting with a topic search
- Finding and verifying citations
- Finding material that's not in the published scholarly literature, such as conference proceedings and white papers can be found using the web.

Google and Google Scholar are among the popular search engines for finding information on the Web (Beeferman & Berger, 2000). The way to do a Google search is to enter one or more selected keywords or phrases into the search box on the Google main page (see Figure 1). Also, selecting the Advanced Search option on the page enables you to use Google Scholars (see figure 3), which enables you to find higher quality search results. Both Google and Google Scholar can provide you access to various databases that provide information for academic and research purposes. These databases help researchers and students get hold of important academic and research resources, statistical surveys etc.

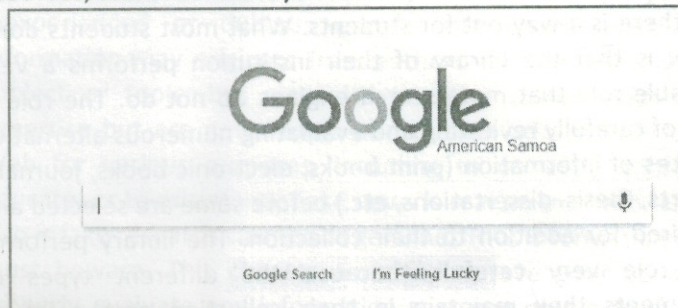


Figure 9.1: Search box of the main Google page.

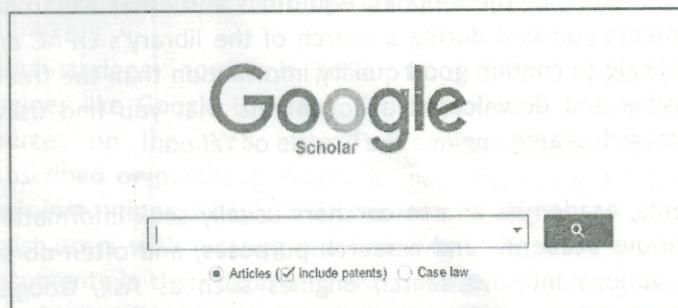


Figure 9.2: Advanced search page (Google Scholar)

For some specialized subjects, you might also have to look beyond even Google Scholar to other specialized search engines that might be more focused on certain subjects. This is because not all the good information out there is available online (Fallows, 2005). Additionally, good quality information is often not available for free download. This is the reason the libraries of tertiary education institutions often subscribe to major academic and research databases such as Elsevier, Springer, IEEE, etc. in order to enable their students and researchers to have access to high quality information.

It is very important that students patronize the e-resources (e-books, e-journals, etc.) that the library of their institutions purchase or subscribe to. Many libraries lament that most students don't use much the high quality e-resources that their libraries acquire at great cost, preferring instead to surf the Internet directly for information and download free documents much of which might be of poor quality. Students should use their libraries more for obtaining both print and electronic documents for their research and academic works in order to encourage the libraries to continue to acquire and maintain good quality resources for them.

9.3 Evaluating what you find

Today, the Internet offers variety of information and data from different sources worldwide. This makes information to be readily available and accessible. But the information may be true or false originate from political propaganda or product marketing sources, or from very good or very poor research sources. Some of the information might be unsuitable for use in any academic or research work, while other information might be adequate in quality only for students' assignments and projects, but inadequate for thesis and dissertation research work.

Thus, it is highly important to always think critically about and evaluate what you find, especially if you are going to use it for academic work purposes, such as writing assignments and projects (Open University, 2017).

A good research effort demands that you read adequate number of good number of sources of information on the topic

of your research so that you can know about the earlier works of others on the topic, and obtain facts and ideas (evidence) to back up your own writings. But, the facts and ideas must be obtained from quality information sources. Thus, you need to critically evaluate the quality of each source before accepting or believing any facts and ideas from it. The key to critical evaluation is a fair and balanced assessment of information obtained from alternative sources. And it is important that you consider both the positive and negative aspects of each of the different sources (Study Hub, 2017).

There are some basic questions that need to be typically considered in evaluating any information resource, print or electronic, this could include:

- Are the authors well-known in the discipline?
- What are the authors' qualifications?
- Do the authors' prior education, work, and publications relate to the topic under research?
- Is the publishing organization clearly identified on the document?
- If the document is a journal article, is the journal peer-reviewed?
- Are the reviewers well-known and knowledgeable in the field?
- Is this organization or publisher recognized as an expert in the field you are researching?

To keep these various criteria in mind, the Open University Library (Open University, 2017) developed an evaluation tool known as **"PROMPT"**, an acronym for **P**resentation, **R**elevance, **O**bjectivity, **M**ethod, **P**rovenance, **T**imeliness, as a guide for evaluating any kind of information. Each of the elements of PROMPT are now explained in the table below.

P R O M P T	Presentation • Is this information clear? • Is the language right? • Can I find what I need here? • Is it succinct? Sometimes what you see may make it hard to judge whether what you have is what you want, or even if the information is worth having. It may be that something which looks insignificant is actually the most important piece of information available. Or it may be that something which looks good on the face of it is not what it seems. However, you need to develop the skill of looking beyond the surface appearance.
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P R O M P T	Relevance • Does this information match my needs right now? Scan it quickly to get an overview. • What is it mostly about? The information in front of you may be of high quality but not actually relevant to the question you are asking or to the scope of your search, for example: ○ Level – it may be too detailed/specialized or too general/simple for the level at which you are working ○ Emphasis – it may not contain the kind of information you are seeking – this is often a question of emphasis, and one which, in the case of a journal article for example, may not easily be identifiable from an abstract ○ Geographic – it may relate to countries or areas you are not interested in at this time. You can probably think of others that relate to your own subject field.
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P R O M P T	Objectivity • It's important to be aware of opinions and hidden agendas. • What are you being "sold" here? A particular product, a corporate view? • Is the language used emotive? • Are opinions expressed? • Are there sponsors? • What are they selling? • What are the vested interests? The concept of objectivity can be problematic. This is especially true of controversial topics such as climate change, wind farms, genetically modified foods, or parenting. However, even information which purports to be 'balanced' may have hidden agendas or vested interests. It is important to develop a critical awareness of the positions or interests represented in what you read.
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P R O M P T	Method • If statistical data is presented, what is this based on? • How was data gathered? • Was the sample used really representative? • Were the methods appropriate, rigorous, etc.?
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	Provenance • Is it clear who produced this information? • Where does it come from? Whose opinions are these? • Do you trust this source of information?
P	Provenance provides 'credentials' for a piece of information and supports its status and perceived value.
R	Knowing the author enables you to find out whether they are an expert in this area and what their perspective is (are their views known to be controversial?), find out what else they have published, find out who else has cited their work and perhaps even contact them.
O	
M	
P	Knowing about the sponsoring organization can help you to understand what their main 'business' is (e.g. commercial, voluntary, research), how well-established it is, who the people involved are, and who they are linked with.
T	Knowing how something was published can help you identify how reliable it is. For example, has it been through an editorial or peer review process by experts in the field? Even if this is the case, you should still evaluate it. Being published in a prestigious academic journal is not an automatic indicator of quality.

P R O M P T	Timeliness • Is this current? • When was it written and produced? • Has the climate/situation changed since this information was made available? • Is it still up to date enough? How important it is to have the very latest information depends on what you need it for. The date is not always easy to find: sometimes online sources do not have a clearly visible publication or 'last updated' date. Also, even information that is not very old may have been superseded, for example, in the case of regularly produced reports or statistics. It is therefore important to be aware of the type of source and how often it is produced.
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PROMPT offers a structured method for evaluating any information that you find online. This is useful if you are looking for information from trustworthy sources to support arguments in an assignment or project. This can also be used in a work environment, for example to find material for a project or report. Note however that the nature of your assignment or work will influence how you evaluate the usefulness of a source.

9.4 Using the information

Any information you find from a retrieved source must be evaluated in terms of the criteria and questions of the PROMPT evaluation method. The information may be facts, ideas or actual words extracted from the text, sound, images or video in the source. It is only after that that you can use the information in your assignment or project. Furthermore, you need to also cite and reference the used information correctly in the project or assignment, to avoid plagiarism. Referencing involves the following two aspects:

- (a) inserting citations to the sources of the used information at the points where the information is used in the text of your project or assignment (known as in-text citations);
- (b) providing information about the source of information itself in the list of reference at the end of the project or assignment.

9.5 Conclusion

These two aspects are referred to as citing in the document and compiling your bibliography (Birkbeck Library, 2014). There are standard approaches to referencing, known as referencing styles, among which are the American Psychological Association (APA), Harvard, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) styles. Another chapter of this book is devoted to the Referencing in more detail. In order to select one, check your course or module handbook for guidance on which style to use. There is also a variety of referencing software that you could use, including EndNote, Zotero, RefMe, Mendeley. These tools can be used to store, manage and organize your references.

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