



# Evaluating your sources

<http://www.screencast.com/t/SSF1zzl3Pq>

## Transcript

### Introduction:

Welcome to this tutorial on evaluating sources, from the University of Reading's Study Advice team. The tutorial is designed for you to go through at your own pace, and you can pause it at any time.

**1. What is a source?:** When we talk about sources of information we're not only referring to books and journal articles. It might be a website. It might be a set of data from primary research. Or a tabloid newspaper article. Or a blog post. Or an interview you've undertaken. It might be a physical object like a statue. Or an advert. Or a bus ticket. It could be this video tutorial! [Head explodes]

The point is that you get the information you need from all sorts of places. So lots of different things can be sources. But they're not all good for the same purposes. You need to think about what you want your source to do, and evaluate whether it is suitable for that purpose.

**2. Is it suitable for its purpose?:** For instance, you might want to find some evidence for how popular ideas about students are formed, and for that a newspaper article could be a good example to discuss. But if you wanted to give your argument some scholarly authority - which is what most people are looking for from their references - you need to refer to sources that are authoritative themselves. A newspaper article wouldn't be much good for that - it's written for a popular audience; it doesn't give you references to show where it got its information from; it doesn't promise to balance both sides of the argument. So

you would need to look for a more scholarly source to support what you want to argue – from a journal or academic book, for instance.

**3. What do you need to ask?:** It doesn't matter what kind of format your source is in. You need to ask the same questions, and put the answers together with your purpose to see if it's the right source for the job.

Is it scholarly? – what sort of reader has it been written for? You're looking for texts that are aimed at an academic readership, whether that's tutors or students.

Is it at the right level? – A-level study guides might be okay as a jumping-off point but they aren't going to give you the level of complex thinking and ideas that you need at university.

Has it been peer-reviewed? - Peer review means that a source has already been evaluated by 'peers' of the author – in the case of academic articles, that will mean other academics who are experts in this field. So if it's been peer-reviewed, you know it'll be authoritative.

When was it published? - Unless you are looking for an important standard work in your field, it's usually better to look for the most recent publications. These will have already taken into account the research that had previously been published. If there's more than one edition, look for the most recent.

**4. The Library can help!:** Sound like a lot of work? Well here's the good news – unlike Google, which will just give you everything and expect you to do the evaluating yourself, your University Library has already done some of the work for you. You can search the Library catalogue for books and know that anything you find will have been stocked because they are the right kind of books to use in university-level study. You will still need to check the date though.

It's not only books that the Library can help with. If you're looking for journal articles or book chapters in edited collections, you could try using the Summon search engine. Summon can be set to search for articles and chapters within books, and it lets you apply filters to help you with your evaluation. So you can restrict your search to 'Scholarly & peer-review' items, and to journal articles. You can change the range for publication dates to restrict your results to the most recent, and limit results to your discipline.

**5. Evaluating websites:** However you might be looking beyond the Library, at websites, for instance. Websites can be good sources but you do need to be careful in how you evaluate them. Look to see if the webpage has a named author – is not, who has responsibility for it? See if there's a date for the page – perhaps when it was last updated? Think carefully about who the website is aimed at and

what its purpose is. You have to judge whether it is objective, and if it has the right kind of authority. Are there references for any figures it cites, for instance?

Be especially careful about webpages that look like scholarly papers – find the author’s name and Google them to see if they are academics. It might just be a paper written by another student – that’s not really the kind of thing to give authority to your work!

**6. What about Wikipedia?:** What about Wikipedia? Well the same principles apply with Wikipedia as with any other source – is it appropriate for the purpose? Like any encyclopaedia, Wikipedia can be a good start point to give you some ideas and basic understanding. But that doesn’t usually make it a good source to refer to as authoritative support for your discussion. Remember that anyone could have edited Wikipedia...!

**7. To sum it up, think about...:** So to sum up, when you’re evaluating your sources, think about the purpose you’re going to use them for, their suitability for that purpose, and their appropriateness – are they reliable, current and at the right level for academic study. Evaluate your sources, and they will pay you back by adding value to your assignments.