Assessing the Academic Appropriateness
Of the Material

Author

- What experience, education, credentials, past writings does the author have?
- What is his/her institutional affiliation?

Publishing Data

- What is the date of publication? For some disciplines, such as the sciences, it is crucial that material be very current, whereas for other disciplines older material is still very useful. Even if currency is a criterion, don’t discard an older work which may be seminal or a classic in the field.
- Who is the publisher? Is it a university press or other reputable publisher?

Coverage

- Checking a book’s table of contents, index, bibliography and references can give you a good indication of the book’s depth and relevance for your work.
- For an article, scanning the title, abstract, introduction, and discussion will help you to assess its usefulness for your paper.
- What is the purpose of the book or article? Does it fulfill this purpose?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What is the central research question? Is it clearly identified?
- Is the document well-researched? Are there any obvious errors or omissions?
- Does the evidence cited support the claims and assumptions made?
- Does the information thoroughly cover the topic?
- Does it add anything new?
- Are the conclusions significant?
- Is it well-written, logically organized, and clearly presented?

Primary and Secondary Source Material

It is important to be able to differentiate between primary and secondary sources when searching for information on a topic.

- **Primary sources** are written or created during the time under study, and offer first hand information.
  Examples include:
  - diaries, speeches, interviews, letters, news film footage
  - creative works (e.g. poetry, drama, music, art)
  - original research
  - annual reports, minutes of meetings, census data
Assessing the Academic Appropriateness Of the Material

- **Secondary sources** interpret, reformulate, discuss, or analyze primary source material, and are a step removed from the actual event.
  
  Examples include:
  - books or articles explaining or reviewing research
  - histories or critical commentaries
  - textbooks and encyclopedias
  - indexes and abstracts

Depending on the context, a source could be considered a primary source for one research paper and a secondary source for another!

Try the University of Massachusetts Library Primary Sources and Secondary Sources Self-Test [http://www.umassd.edu/specialprograms/info_lit/quiz_ps.html](http://www.umassd.edu/specialprograms/info_lit/quiz_ps.html)

**Distinguishing Scholarly Journals from Popular Magazines**

Journals and magazines are both called “periodicals” because they are published at regular intervals (i.e. periodically). However, there are major differences between them, as summarized below:

- **Scholarly journals** typically:
  - are intended for a scholarly audience (e.g. researchers, professors, students)
  - are narrow in their focus
  - are written by a scholar or researcher in the field
  - have references and/or bibliographies
  - are often reviewed or refereed by other scholars before publication
  - are published by academic or association presses
  - include original research, reviews, or essays


- **Popular magazines** typically:
  - are intended for a general audience
  - are broad in their focus
  - are written by professional writers or journalists
  - do not have references and bibliographies
  - are published by commercial presses
  - are intended to entertain, inform, or introduce a topic

  Examples of popular magazines include: Macleans, Time, BC Report

25 February 2014

Infoline@uvic.ca