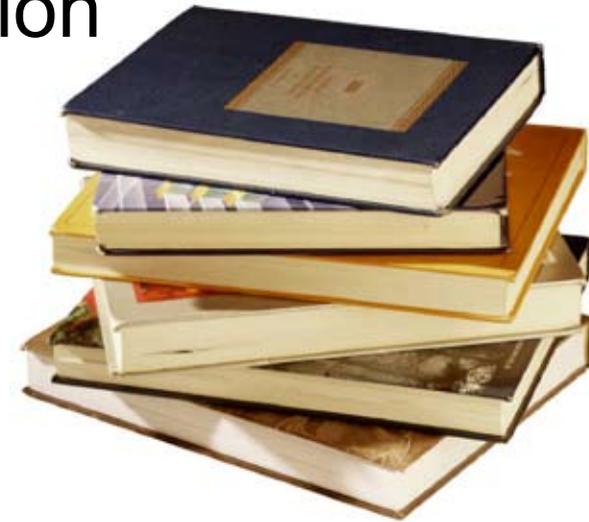


Finding and evaluating information



Your first call for information is other people – who knows something about the information I need to know? Your friends, family, teachers and Scouters have a vast array of information that is contained in their heads and you need to talk to them about it. If they do not have the information you require often they will be able to help in directing you to other sources. This will be first hand information based on knowledge and experience.

Getting information from wider sources will immediately direct you to two areas of discovery – the library and the 'web'. The library provides both sources – books and access to the web. The web, however, is easy to access directly from your home, as is television and radio. Information is available everywhere and the skill that needs to be developed is the ability to find and process the information you require. There are many different way to present the same information – books, magazines, web pages, blogs, television programmes, you tube etc. each using it own individual medium to present the information on offer.

Often the full understanding of a subject is gained by combining the information available from a number of sources and backing up this information with practical experience and know how.

Information sources

Books are often a good starting point to begin to explore a new subject area. The 'Web' will probably be your first port of call but often the information you require will be scattered. Books however can be more comprehensive and treat a subject as a whole rather than provide partial information. So, a book on canoeing, for example, will typically start at the beginning – parts of a canoe, how to get in and out of a canoe and progress to strokes and cruising perhaps.

Magazines are somewhat like the web, they provide short information pieces, but again, rarely provide the full picture but rather 'interest pieces' of a particular subject e.g. an article about choosing walking boots and not an article about the wider subject of hill walking. Magazines have a 'flick' element, that is, they are designed to be 'flicked' through and attract the viewer to particular pages. So, short information pieces with lots of photography or illustrations are their preferred method of imparting information.

Newspapers can be similar to magazines, but they also provide longer 'opinion' pieces and explanation pieces to enable the reader to more fully understand a complex issue of the day. These longer articles are often balanced by shorter news items.

Specialist articles, perhaps produced as part of an educational exam can provide detailed and reasoned information that is very helpful. The writing style adapted for such documents however can be difficult to understand for the average viewer. This is because the writers of these papers are doing so to pass on the right information related to a subject of study rather than delight the reader in the content.

The web is a great information resource; it is instant, it requires a computer, and allows the viewer to interact with all kinds of information presentations and styles. Because of the wide variety of presentation styles it can provide, many different angles on the same information can be found on web pages. The viewer, therefore, needs to be aware of the source information and cross check to make sure that statements made are correct.

Wikipedia is a good starting point for any particular subject and often includes a bank of links to similar information on a subject.

Blogs are generally written by enthusiasts and are very personal in nature. The writer is generally expressing their view on a subject and their thoughts may not be universally accepted by the general public, so err with caution. However, if the writer is talking about a subject they love and has a wealth of expertise then these articles will normally contain useful guidance and outlooks that can help in your information quest.



How to do and expert sites – many sites exist that aim to help the reader in a practical way e.g. how to paint a door, how to take a picture, how to tie a knot. These are excellent sites for precise, practical information and ‘how to do’

You Tube – this is a visual site presenting information in video form. While the popular view of You Tube is one of entertainment the site also contains many useful video presentations and clips that can aid in your information quest and present information in a visual rather than written form.

Evaluating information from different sources

The World Wide Web offers information and data from all over the world. Because so much information is available, and because that information can appear to be fairly “anonymous”, it is necessary to develop skills to evaluate what you find. When you use a research or academic library, the books, journals and other resources have already been evaluated by scholars, publishers and librarians. Every resource you find has been evaluated in one way or another before you ever see it. When you are using the World Wide Web, none of this applies. There are no filters. Because anyone can write a Web page, documents of the widest range of quality, written by authors of the widest range of authority, are available on an even playing field. Excellent resources reside alongside the most dubious.

Authorship - Who wrote this? When you look at information you want to know the basis of the authority with which the author speaks. Is the author well-known and well-regarded name you recognize. The author is mentioned in a positive fashion by another author or another person you trust. The publishing body also helps evaluate any kind of document you may be reading. In the print universe, this generally means that the author’s manuscript has undergone screening in order to verify that it meets the standards or aims of the organization that serves as publisher.

Point of view or bias reminds us that information is rarely neutral. Because data is used in selective ways to form information, it generally represents a point of view. Every writer wants to prove his point, and will use the data and information that assists him in doing so. When evaluating information found on the Internet, it is important to examine who is providing the “information” you are viewing, and what might be their point of view or bias.

When looking for information, it is always critical to remember that everyone has an opinion. Because the structure of the Internet allows for easy self publication, the variety of points of view and bias will be the widest possible.

Accuracy or verifiability of details is an important part of the evaluation process, especially when you are reading the work of an unfamiliar author presented by an unfamiliar organization.

Currency refers to the timeliness of information. In printed documents, the date of publication is the first indicator of currency. For some types of information, currency is not an issue for many other types of data, however, currency is extremely important, as is the regularity with which the data is updated.

All information, whether in print or by byte, needs to be evaluated by readers for authority, appropriateness, and other personal criteria for value. If you find information that is “too good to be true”, it probably is. Never use information that you cannot verify.

“Cast a cold eye” (as Yeats wrote) on everything you read. Question it. Look for other sources that can authenticate or corroborate what you find. Learn to be skeptical and then learn to trust your instincts.

