

11

Evaluation of resources

The importance of evaluation • Criteria for evaluation

The importance of evaluation

Analysis of the problem and definition of the information need will have laid the foundations for the evaluation of resources. During the research process the researcher will encounter much more information than they will use, and they will have to select or reject what they find in order to build a relevant reserve for the project. The process of selection will be governed by evaluation. Any resource that is selected must have been chosen for its relevance; any that are irrelevant should be rejected.

The question, 'Is this resource relevant to the project?' should be considered for every item that is encountered. For some resources it is obvious they are irrelevant, but for others, it is not so straightforward.

The process of evaluation takes place throughout the research process as resources are discovered, located, and accessed. All types of resources should be evaluated for relevance, whatever their length or format, that is, whether it is the citation, abstract, or full text of a document, photograph, list of data, or government report.

Academics use a well respected method of evaluation called peer review. This is when articles or other items are scrutinized by expert reviewers prior to publication. This process often takes place using a blind review procedure or with the reviewers remaining anonymous to the author(s). Some disciplines or communities use the practice of open review where the item is made widely available for others to comment on it. Researchers should take trouble to find out whether they materials they wish to use have been peer reviewed or not. It is worth noting that open access journal articles have often been subject to as critical a peer review process as their closed access counterparts.

Practical considerations

Citations or bibliographic descriptions

Citations and bibliographic descriptions can be difficult to evaluate for relevance because so little information is included. Additional information may be required to judge some items. This could mean accessing publisher's information or obtaining the full text in order to facilitate a more informed decision.

Abstracts and summaries

Abstracts and summaries are excellent for assessing validity and relevance. They are short enough to be read quickly and, providing they are well written, include key points in a succinct and meaningful manner.

Full content

The researcher will not have the time or the inclination to read the entire content of every full text resource, such as books or articles, they encounter. They therefore have four options:

- To read any given abstract or summary. In the case of a book, this might be the introduction, the information on the back cover or that supplied by a publisher
- To read any headings or tables of contents
- To scan the document. This is a skill in itself and takes some practice
- To look carefully at any diagrams or tables that are included in the item as they give much information in an easily digested form

For many items, evaluation is a two stage process. If selected using, say, only a citation, the researcher should have the evaluation criteria in mind when reading the full text.

Criteria for evaluation

Like the evaluation of a website (see Chapter 9), there are a number of criteria that should be considered when attempting to evaluate a resource:

- Provenance: author, authority, reputation, publisher
- Content: level, composition, accuracy, comprehensiveness, currency, bias, substantiality, uniqueness, validity, intended audience, writing and language, organization

- Relation to the subject: importance of work, comparison with other sources
- Access and use: availability, accessibility, timescale, permissions, format

Table 11.1 lists questions that should be considered when evaluating a resource. The researcher should consider those that have some bearing on the item under scrutiny. A decision about relevance can be taken fairly quickly, depending on the responses. The entries in bold type are first step, quick check questions which will help the researcher check quickly whether a resource should be rejected or not.

Table 11.1 Evaluation of resources: points to consider

Provenance

Author

Who is the author?

What are the author's qualifications, reputation, or credentials?

Does the author have any affiliation with a recognized body or institution?

Is the author a recognized expert in the subject area?

Is the author cited by other experts in the subject?

If there is no named author(s), from where does the item originate?

Authority

Has the resource been peer reviewed, refereed, or edited?

Has the resource been sponsored in any way or validated by a recognized authority (perhaps in a forward)?

Are any references to the resource from reputable sources?

Have the details been obtained from a reliable source?

Publisher

Is the publisher a recognized academic publisher or other recognized source?

If not, what is their reputation?

Content

Accuracy

Where possible, check the accuracy of the content

Are spelling, diagrams, and typesetting accurate?

Bias

What is/are the reason(s) for publication? For example, extending knowledge or commercial?

Is there any obvious or more subtle bias, political, commercial, or otherwise?

Comparisons

Is there any evidence of commercial sponsorship?

Does the resource duplicate material from other sources?

If so, which sources should be retained and which rejected?

Does the author repeat material written by others?

Does the resource include research methods or design similar to those being used by the researcher?

Composition

Are there any indexing terms, descriptors, keywords, or subject headings to describe the content?

Is the resource a primary or secondary source?

Comprehensiveness

Have any topics or elements been omitted?

Does the resource achieve its stated purpose?

Does the content match the abstract or table of contents?

Does the content meet the claims of the author or abstract?

Is there too much/too little detail?

Is the coverage too broad/too narrow?

Does the research form the main topic or a peripheral topic?

Currency	<p>What is the date of publication?</p> <p>There may be some time between conception and publication. Is the resource still valid?</p>
Intended audience	<p>If the content is historical, is it relevant?</p> <p>At whom is the resource mainly aimed?</p>
Organization	<p>Is the level too simplistic/too complex?</p> <p>Is the division of chapters and sections useful to the reader?</p> <p>Do any headings make sense?</p> <p>Do diagrams or illustrations enhance the text?</p> <p>Are diagrams, illustrations, and tables placed in close proximity to relevant text, avoiding awkward page turns?</p> <p>Is the title meaningful and does it reflect the content?</p> <p>Does the resource contain additional information such as further reading or information about related materials?</p> <p>Are the layout and typesetting clear and easy to use?</p> <p>Are sections an appropriate length for ease of use?</p> <p>Is the system of numbering or headings useful to the user?</p> <p>Is the index comprehensive</p>
Substance	<p>What is the tone of the content?</p> <p>Does it have seriousness and gravitas?</p>
Uniqueness	<p>Is it significant?</p> <p>Can the information be obtained elsewhere?</p> <p>Does the resource contain ground-breaking research or other original work?</p>
Validity	<p>Is the resource a unique primary source?</p> <p>Is the work based on sound research?</p> <p>Are references and a bibliography included?</p> <p>Are any citations from reputable sources?</p> <p>Is there reliable evidence to support any claims or results of investigations?</p> <p>Is any data used gathered from reliable sources?</p>
Use of language	<p>Are explanations clear?</p> <p>Is the sentence construction confused or too verbose?</p> <p>What is the style of writing: academic, informal?</p> <p>Is the text grammatically correct?</p> <p>Are any technical terms, acronyms, or other unusual terms explained?</p>
Relation to the subject	
Comparisons	<p>Does the content support or oppose other subject specialists?</p>
Publication	<p>If an article, what is the journal's impact factor rating?</p>
Significance	<p>Is the resource a significant work in the subject area?</p> <p>Have other respected authors in the subject field made reference to the work?</p>
Access and use	
Availability	<p>Does the complete item exist?</p> <p>If so, where?</p>
Accessibility	<p>Is the content accessible by the researcher?</p> <p>If it is accessible, is it available in time for the researcher's needs?</p>
Format	<p>Is the resource in a format that is acceptable to the researcher?</p> <p>Is it clear what the format will be (from bibliographic or descriptive details)?</p> <p>Is the resource available in multiple formats?</p>

(Continued overleaf)

Table 11.1 Continued

	What is the country of origin of the resource?
	In what language is the full text (this may differ to the bibliographic details)?
	If the language is one not used by the researcher, is a translation available?
	Will the country of origin have any bearing on the content (for example, bias)
Permissions	Is any special permission required to access or use the resource?
	Can copyright and other permissions be obtained in time?
	Is it clear who should be contacted to obtain any permissions?
Overall judgement	Does the resource comply with the criteria set when delimiting the area of research?

Key points

- Every item should be tested with the question, ‘Is this resource relevant to the project?’
- The evaluation can take the form of a series of pertinent questions

Checklist

- 1 Are you satisfied that the information you have gathered or intend to gather satisfies your criteria in provenance, content, and relation to the subject?
- 2 Can you access and do you have permission to use the information you have found?