

Rules to Determine Relevance in a Resource

Directions: Here are some rules to consider when you are determining whether a source is relevant to your research assignment. Use your reading annotation strategies as you review the rules below so you can find useful and reliable sources in your next research activity.

1. What is it about? As you review an article, realize there will be clues to tell you whether the content is relevant to your topic. You can scan the summary, title, headings, and subtitles to see whether the article is related to the topic. Knowing the discipline of an article is an important clue in determining relevance. You may be able to tell from the title of the book/article or the journal. For example, if you are researching global-warming activism for a government class, an article on global warming from a chemistry journal will not be relevant. The title of the journal should tell you what field the article came from.

2. Are you looking for recent information? If so, the publication date will be a critical clue as to whether the article or book is relevant. Consider the topic, “the negative effects of smoking.” If you looked at articles from the 1960s, you would find many doctors believed there was little to no harm in smoking. These doctors were considered trustworthy; however, their opinions are now outdated and no longer relevant because research in the last 50 years proves them wrong.

3. What type of article is it? Some articles are going to be more connected and relevant to your topic than others.

Scholarly - If you are looking for more scholarly information, look for websites ending with “.edu”; “.gov”; and “.org.” Information on these websites comes from a university, research center, or government office that have lots of experts reviewing the information for accuracy. The information from these sites is generally peer-reviewed, that is, the articles are read and evaluated by experts in the field under consideration. The sites generally include signed articles, a statement of the author's credentials or academic affiliation, and a bibliography.

Popular - If you are looking for information from pop culture and general opinions from society, you will find that in sites ending in “.com” and “.net.” These sites are generally not peer-reviewed and usually do not contain a bibliography. Also, these sites can be businesses that are trying to get you to buy something or persuade your thinking to buy or support them. Again, your topic should guide your research, but know that these sources are generally regarded to be below the level of scholarly sources.

Other points to consider:

- Size - Is the source a general overview of an entire topic or field? Or is it highly specific? Or is it something in between? The purpose of your writing assignment will help you decide the appropriate scope of the sources that you use.
- Audience - Who is the intended audience of the piece? What is the educational level or political, religious, or ideological orientation of the intended audience?