
Different information source types

When completing assignments, you will have to use lots of different resources. This is a summary of different sources of information that you may use while at university and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Dictionaries



It is good to have a dictionary nearby when you are reading a document, particularly if it is in a subject or topic that is new to you.

- Dictionaries are useful to find definitions of terms, subjects or topics

Encyclopaedias

Encyclopaedias provide a little more detail than a dictionary and can be a useful starting point:

- A concise overview of the key aspects of a subject or concept
- A review of the history of a topic
- References to further information
- Biographical details of key figures

The Discovery search will often give you a result which is an encyclopaedia article.



Wikipedia is a well-known online encyclopaedia but has variable quality and should not be relied upon for your university research. If you do use it at all be sure to follow up references to other sources to check the factual content and to reference these rather than Wikipedia itself.

Books

Books may be textbooks at school or university level. They can provide:

- An in-depth overview of a subject
- A good grounding in a new discipline
- A comparison of differing ideas, theories and opinions
- Facts and figures

Books can become out of date due to the length of time taken in the publishing process. This is more important in some subjects than others.

E-Books

Many books are now available as electronic versions or e-books:

- Some are exact copies of the print version
- Some provide additional features, e.g. video, self-learning tests, quizzes etc.
- Some e-books can be downloaded onto hand-held devices for more comfortable reading while others require an Internet connection
- e-books are useful because they can be viewed by several readers at once while a printed book is only available to one person at a time.

Journal articles

Articles may be either reviews or research papers. Research papers directly report primary research and are the most common type of journal article.

Advantages:

- More up-to-date than books as publication is faster unless they are an old journal article
- Usually 'peer reviewed', i.e. they have been rigorously assessed and evaluated by experts in the field to ensure that the research and conclusions are valid
- Detailed, covering a specific aspect of a subject in much more detail than books
- Usually short, factual and contain precise research methods and results

Disadvantages:

- Might only provide a general overview of a subject, rather than in-depth information
- May only be an introduction to a new topic

Websites

There is loads of information available on the Internet, but don't rely on Wikipedia and YouTube for your university studies and do ensure that the websites you use are reliable.

Advantages:

- Easy access
- Mostly up-to-date (but check)
- Include various types of media e.g. illustrations, videos, sound
- Available 24/7

Disadvantages:

- Variable quality and lack of control. Anyone can publish a website
- They may become out-of-date
- Content can be biased
- Websites can disappear
- Information overload

Newspapers

As sources of current information and topical comment, newspapers can be good sources for primary research information.

Advantages:

- Currency/immediacy
- Eyewitness accounts
- Awareness raising
- Opinions and comment on topical issues

Disadvantages:

- Lack of peer review or accuracy checks
- Sensationalism/writing to sell copy
- Bias, perhaps written with particular political viewpoint
- Not usually written at an academic level

Reports

Reports are produced by agencies and departments on specific topics or issues. These agencies can include Government departments, research establishments, charitable foundations and more.

Advantages:

- Up to date information since they are usually published to a specific deadline or as a reaction to an event
- Current views and opinions
- Recommendations about future practice
- Technical information, statistics or data that you would not find in books or journal articles

Disadvantages:

- They become out of date as they reflect the current situation at a given time
- Not all reports are published so they can be difficult to locate

