

mind, let's go through some steps on how to evaluate an article for your research paper.



To begin, you want to identify your topic. What is the theme or thesis of the paper? What are going to be your main concepts? What are some keywords which apply to your subject? When you have a clear sense of your subject, you will be able to narrow down exactly what information you are looking for.



Next, use the keywords and subjects to run a search. Let's say your search was successful and you select an article with a promising title. Now, look through that article and identify pertinent terms to add to your search terms in order to refine and narrow the results.

In PsycInfo, look under the tab *Complete Reference* for lots of useful information, including a list of keywords and subject headings.

Remember how we said your search was successful? You had several articles that came up from your search. The next challenge is, how will you choose the articles that are most pertinent to your research idea?

First, read the abstract. What is the scope and breadth of the article? In short, what dimensions of your topic does the article cover? Is it a general work that

provides an overview of the topic or is it specifically focused on only one aspect of your topic? Does the resource cover the right time period that you are interested in?

Next, identify the purpose of this article. Is it a presentation of research findings? A review of all current literature on the topic? An analysis of current trends on your topic? An historical view of the topic to explain why the research is now looking at the current series of questions?

Third, look at the publication date. Is the article recently published and is the information up-to-date? If the information is dated, is it unique, enduring, and suitable for your topic? Does it have value as part of a trend you will be discussing in your paper?

Fourth, you will want to find recourses that have been peer-reviewed. **Peer review** is the process by which a scholar's paper is **reviewed by experts** in a field before being accepted for publication. Journal articles that have gone through a peer review process carry the weight of authority. Here is an example: If you wanted to understand the trends in behavior modification therapy, what would you rely on: an article in the *Ladies Home Journal* or the *Journal of Behavior Modification*? Which one would you submit to your professor as a source for your research paper?

You may also want to consider the length of your research articles. Long articles provide more opportunity for in-depth analysis of a specific topic. On the other hand, an article that is focused and succinctly presents the support for its thesis is a pleasure to read.

Take a look at the conclusion. Are the conclusions consistent with the purpose of the article and the abstract? Identify the key conclusions the author comes to and presents in the article.

What sources did the author use? Articles have a bibliography, works cited list, or footnotes to document books, articles, and other sources used by the author. Read the bibliography. These sources tell you whose ideas were used in this article.

Then look up who has cited the article you are looking at. Look at a "cited by" source, so you can see what articles and authors continued the theme(s) of this article. You can find "cited by" information in Web of Knowledge and in PsycInfo when you look up the article. After some research, you should recognize a number of other authors who form a cluster of leading researchers on your topic.

Research the authors. What institutions do they work for? Look up the institution to learn more about the specialization of the department. For practice, look up a department in FMHI and read about its mission, its current projects, the CV of

one or two of the faculty members, and other information that will give you an idea of the authority of your source.

Finally, consider the quality of the journal that publishes the article. Is it an academic journal? These journals contain articles that report **original research** within a specific academic field. Occasionally the term “refereed” is used instead of “reviewed.” These journals are usually considered to be an authoritative source of information on their subject, with articles written by researchers who are scholars and experts in that field. Scholarly articles are one form of scholarly communication, used by researchers in a subject to communicate with other researchers (and students).

How do you evaluate the journal? Is the journal published by a scholarly association or society, or a university, or a recognized academic publisher? Look up the Impact factor in the Journal Citation Reports, a databank within the Web of Knowledge database. The impact factor indicates the prestige of the journal in its field, so any number of 1.0 is good. (Remember this feature when you think about where to submit your own paper for publication!)

At this point, you should know whether you want to keep the article as a potential resource for your paper.

Here are some suggestions about the research process:

--Keep track of what database you searched in, what terms you used, on what date.

--Keep track of new ideas for subject headings, key words and concepts you want to try another time. That way, in ten days when you have time to search again, you have fresh ideas for your research and you are not repeating old searches.

--Not all databases use the same subject headings, but keywords in any database should lead you to subject headings, so keep track of what keywords lead to which subject headings. You can always search on keywords in any database. These terms will form a cluster of words that will define your topic.

Ask your professor to review your work from time to time, and ask a librarian to show you how to do any of these searches. One of the librarians' roles is to teach students the tools for research so you can work efficiently and effectively. The advantage of studying at the university includes unlimited access to databases, books, and other media that is considered authoritative for your research.

As your research progresses, you may want to write an annotated bibliography. See the instructional video entitled, *Creating an Annotated Bibliography* on the FMHI Research Library guide under the chocolate tab at the top labeled, Instructional Videos. <http://guides.lib.usf.edu/FMHI-Library>.

You will certainly want to keep the article citation information handy. See the instructional video on the Library homepage entitled, *Using Content Management Systems*, also at <http://guides.lib.usf.edu/FMHI-Library>.