

In Context Toolbox – How to Judge Information

The **In Context Toolbox** tip sheets are designed to help middle school and high school researchers prepare a written report. This document will explain how to **judge various types of information** used to write reports.

Need more help with your report? Visit Help in any In Context resources for more **In Context Toolbox Tip Sheets!**

Information comes from lots of different sources. Here are some you're probably familiar with:

- **Encyclopedias**
- **Books**
- **Magazines**
- **Newspapers**
- **Sites on the internet**

Every source has its own way of presenting information. Some information is reliable and factual. Some is guesswork and opinion. Some is pure fun. And some isn't useful at all. The trick is to know the difference.

When you're doing research for a report, you want to make sure that your sources are good. How do you decide which are good and which are not? Your teachers and librarians can guide you, but in the end, you have to be the judge. Here are some questions to ask yourself when you judge information:

- Is this source reliable? Does it contain facts, or opinions?
- Is this source complete? Does it say all there is to say about my topic?
- Is this source up-to-date? Was it written recently, or a long time ago?

Encyclopedias

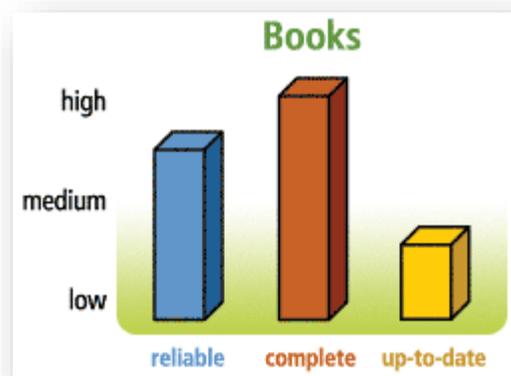
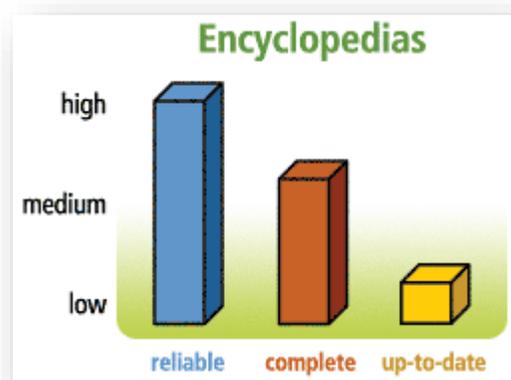
You probably use encyclopedias a lot when you do research for a report. This is fine, because the information in encyclopedias is nearly always factual. In some ways, encyclopedia articles (often called "entries") are kind of like reports - they are written to inform you about a subject. Encyclopedias are rich in facts. So, does this mean that encyclopedias always have the best information? Not exactly.

Encyclopedia articles usually present just the highlights of a topic. Encyclopedia articles aren't very complete. Often, you'll need more detail than an encyclopedia can provide. Also, encyclopedias don't always have the latest information about a topic. They aren't always up-to-date. Sometimes you'll need more current information.

Books

Books are very good sources to use when writing a report about something. They are usually reliable, so long as the purpose of the book is to inform. What's more, if you're lucky enough to find a book on your topic, you'll probably find plenty of facts and details. Books are usually complete sources - they usually cover their topic thoroughly.

But books are sometimes out-of-date. Always check to see when your book was written before using it as a report source. If it's more than a few years old, it may be missing some new information that you'll want to know about.

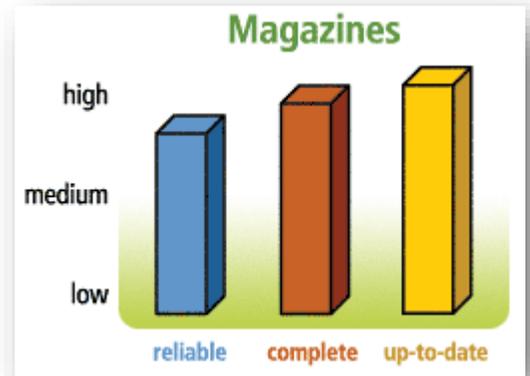


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Magazines

Magazine articles are also very good sources of information for reports. They are often rich in facts. Often, they are even more detailed than books. And the information in magazine articles is usually very up-to-date.

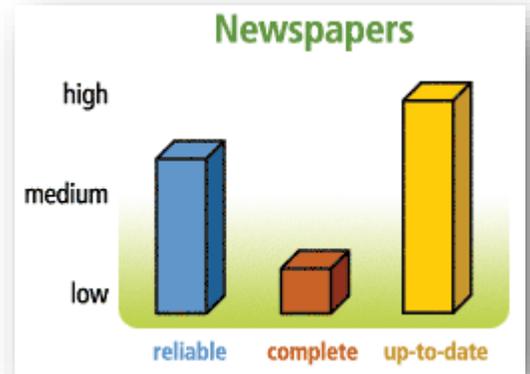
But some magazine articles are just for fun. These articles aren't written to inform you, but to make you laugh. So, when using a magazine article as a report source, always judge the purpose of the article. Is it educational or just entertainment? Use educational articles as report sources.



Newspapers

Newspapers can also be good sources of information for reports. Newspaper articles are often about current events, so the information in newspapers is usually current. You usually can't get much more up-to-date than a daily newspaper. Newspaper articles are often factual, especially the ones on the front page.

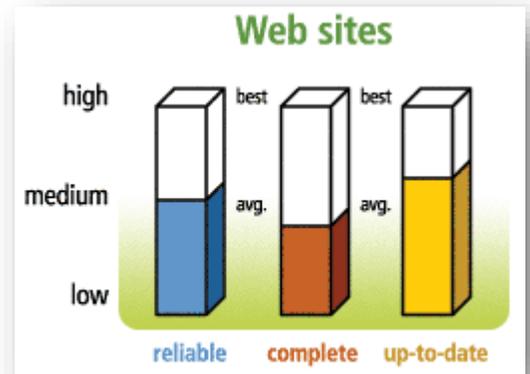
However, sometimes there isn't all that much detail in a newspaper article. Like encyclopedias, newspapers tend to present the highlights of a topic. Newspaper coverage isn't as complete as the coverage in other sources.



Websites

It's not always easy to judge information on websites. Some websites are very reliable, but others are not. Some cover their topic in great detail, but many provide only the highlights. Many are updated regularly, but some are not updated at all. So how do you judge?

One trick to use is to judge websites in the same way you judge magazine articles - consider the purpose. Is the information on the website meant to help you learn, or is it just for fun? The best websites to use as report sources are the ones that are meant to inform you about something. Websites meant to entertain you aren't as useful as report sources.



Something to keep in mind about websites...

Online databases available from your library are accessed via the web and may look like websites but keep in mind that these databases are often made up of encyclopedias, books, magazines, and other sources. These types of sources rate very high in reliability, completeness, and currency. Look for citations in those sources to see where the sources are coming from and to check dates.

Need more help? Ask your librarian!