Evaluating Information

Here are four different ways to look at a print or web source of information in order to determine whether or not you should use it for a research paper.

Currency
You should carefully determine the age of any information you use, and decide whether it's appropriate for the topic you are discussing. Obviously, newer books, articles, and websites are usually better, but not always. In general, any technological topic requires that information be no older than five years. Even five years might be too old. But if you were doing a historical topic, like the life of Thomas Jefferson, some of the information sources you use might be hundreds of years old, and that's okay.

Authority
It's a good idea to find some information about the author of the source. In general, it's better to use information written by someone who is an expert in the field. For example, the articles in many magazines are written by professional journalists, not experts in the field they are discussing. It's not wrong to use these sources, but it's better to use more scholarly resources if you are looking for truly authoritative information. In addition, some printed sources are generally more respected than others. For example, an article from the *New York Times* might carry more weight than an article from the *Bakersfield Californian*, because the *New York Times* is more well-known and generally well-respected.

Purpose
Usually information has a purpose, whether it be to entertain, to persuade, to inform, to sell a product, or to disseminate scholarly information. You probably already realize that the true purpose of much of the information on the Web is to sell you something. To some extent, that is also true of printed resources. After all, they want you to buy books, newspapers, and magazines and look at advertisements. But in general, the printed materials you would find in a Library are more likely to want to inform or persuade than to entertain or sell.

Point of View
It's tempting to think that information that appears in printed form rarely has an ulterior motive, but the truth is that many publications have a bias. For example, an article from the magazine *National Review* will probably have a conservative viewpoint. One from *The Nation* will have a more progressive or liberal viewpoint. Of course this doesn't mean you can't use information from these sources. But you should know the slant of the publication or website or publisher before you use it.