Evaluating Database Results
From the University of Kentucky

So how do you know when you've found quality information in a database, information that you can use in your research assignments? Look for evidence of quality by asking questions about the resource’s Authority, Purpose, Currency, Accuracy, and Relevancy. Let’s practice using these questions to evaluate articles in databases.

First, Authority: Is the author qualified to write about the topic? Is the author associated with a university or research organization? Seeing universities and organizations listed here [video shows a citation with author affiliations highlighted] is usually a good sign. Use the presence or absence of institutions and academic degrees as evidence to support your judgment.

Next, Purpose: Why was this article written? Quality information is going to be very clear in expressing purpose, and you should expect to see that in the articles you use. You’re going to have to read the article with a critical eye. Does the article really do what it says it would? [article shown on screen with a partial sentence highlighted “...this article is intended to address these gaps...”] You can't just take their word for it.

Next, Currency: For some topics, current information is really important [writing on the screen: cancer research], and for other topics [writing on the screen: the bicycle], not so much. It's important that you know the difference for your topic. [Article citation shown on screen with publish date circled] This article was published in 2006 shortly after the end of Sierra Leone Civil War, so it's a good match. If this article was published before the Civil War began, we'd probably not use it.

Next, Accuracy: Accuracy deals with how truthful and reliable the information is, and part of this has to do with how the author presents the information. Does the author connect the information in the article with information from other sources? Seeing a list of references is one way to prove that.

Finally, Relevancy: How does the information you found relate to your topic? The title of the article can help you answer this question. Also look at the name of the publication it was published in, the subject terms associated with the article, and then skim the introduction, conclusion, and headings throughout the article.

All of this can help you judge the main ideas of the information and determine how they're related to your topic. So evaluating information is a complex process, but by asking questions about Authority, Purpose, Currency, Accuracy, and Relevancy, and looking for evidence of these, you can identify quality information easier. And as always, when you have questions, ask us.