Referencing online resources

Online resources provide evidence and examples to back up your own points and ideas, so they should be treated like any other source. Remember that information published on a website is someone else’s work or ideas, so you will need to add an accurate citation.

Reference websites fully and accurately, including the date you accessed the site. Don’t forget that visual information (e.g. pictures, photos, diagrams, graphs) from websites also needs to be referenced.

To cite a website in the body of your assignment, use author or title and date the webpage was published (not the date you accessed it):

e.g. The 2004 report shows that this figure is increasing (HEFCE, 2004).

In the bibliography, list as many details as are available from this list in this order: Author, year of publication, title of webpage, URL, date accessed.


If you can’t find a date of publication, use n.d. (stands for no date).

More help with using & evaluating websites...

The Internet Detective – a useful tutorial on how to evaluate websites:
www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/

Internet resources and websites: evaluation
www.reading.ac.uk/library/finding-info/guides/lib-evaluating-websites.aspx

Guides to useful web resources in your subject

For more information on researching your assignment...

See Researching your assignment 1. Effective academic reading
See Researching your assignment 2. Making better notes

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Study Advice and Maths Support

Using & evaluating websites

Researching your assignment 3

This guide covers the appropriate use of websites as sources of evidence and how to evaluate their reliability. It includes advice on:

- Can I use websites in my assignments?
- Finding online resources
- Evaluating online resources
- Referencing online resources

Can I use websites in my assignments?

The short answer is “yes – but you must use them appropriately”. Websites can provide valuable evidence to support your discussion, just like books or paper journals. For instance, many authoritative sources such as academic institutions, government and research bodies, or charities use the internet to make important data available as quickly and freely as possible. Journal articles are also often available online, and an increasing number of journals are only available electronically.

However, unlike academic books and journals which are usually peer-reviewed before being published, websites can potentially be written by anyone. So you do need to spend more time assessing their reliability.

Top tip: Make sure you refer to a variety of sources in your assignments - don’t just cite websites, as this demonstrates a very limited range of research. Using a mixture of books, journals and websites will usually produce the best results.
Finding online resources

A straightforward Google search will give you millions of hits, most of which are irrelevant or not at the right level to use in your work. Search thoughtfully to save wasting time.

Choose your search terms carefully. Use speech marks to search for a phrase rather than separate words. Use advanced search features to limit language or year. Consider whether there are synonyms for your search terms that you could also try.

Try a dedicated academic search engine like Google Scholar http://scholar.google.com/. This will search peer-reviewed papers, theses, books, abstracts and articles. Some of these will be available online or through Reading’s subscription to various e-journals. However, note that not everything is listed on Scholar – if you rely solely on it, you may miss something important.

Go straight to a reputable source: the University Library has collated good, reputable academic online resources in each subject area. See the Library website at www.reading.ac.uk/library.

Evaluating online resources

Use this checklist adapted from the Library’s guide to evaluating websites to help you judge whether a web resource is reliable and appropriate:

Authority
- Who is responsible for the page/site?
- Is it a reliable organisation (e.g. a well known university) or a subject expert?
- Can you trust them?

Accuracy and reliability
- Is the information correct?
- Is the grammar and spelling correct?
- Is it complete, or are they just giving one point of view?
- Do they have their own agenda e.g. political organisations?
- Is the information fact or opinion?
- Is the information backed up by evidence? Is the evidence based on research? Is it reliable?

Currency
- Can you tell how up-to-date it is?
- Is it regularly updated? You don’t want to quote out-of-date information

Audience / relevance
- Is the information at the right level to be quoted in your project?

Feel
- Is the site well structured and easy to navigate?
- Are the links from the page up-to-date and valid?
- If it is well designed and maintained then you can feel more confident about the information it provides

Use Wikipedia – but wisely! It isn’t usually acceptable to cite Wikipedia as a source in your assignments. Information on Wikipedia can be edited by anyone, so may be unreliable, and it often isn’t at the correct level for university work. However, Wikipedia can provide a brief introduction to a complex topic and give you an overview from which you can then do further in-depth research. You wouldn’t cite Wikipedia, but it can get you started thinking about the topic.

Using online resources

You can use authoritative online resources as evidence in the same way that you would use books or journals. But beware - online resources are so easy to find and access that it might be tempting to do all your research on the web. This is not a good idea – there may be a lot of information online, but that doesn’t mean it’s the most suitable material for your assignment. For instance, a standard search will often produce a lot of newspaper articles that report on and summarise research. Such articles might be good evidence for an essay on media portrayals of topics, but not appropriate for a scientific literature review. However, the articles might help you find the original research to use directly.

Top tip: Compare and cross-check what you read on websites with what you read in book chapters and journal articles.