How to Do Internet Research

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The internet has made researching a topic easier than ever before. Instead of making a trip to the library, people with internet access can simply pull up a search engine, type, and click away. But, in addition to making it easier to access information, the web has also made it easier to access misinformation.[1] [2] [3] However, by following some simple rules, you can avoid being fooled or misinformed by a phony, inaccurate, or biased web source.

Part 1

Part 1 of 4: Knowing Where to Begin

1 **Decide where to start your search.** If your employer, college, or university provides you with a search engine or directory, begin there. If you have access to a library database of research articles, such as EBSCOhost, start there.[4] Library databases provide you with access to peer-reviewed research, which is the gold standard for academic study. “Peer-reviewed” means that top experts in the field have reviewed the research to make sure it is accurate, trustworthy, and informed before publishing it. Even if you’re just trying to learn something for your own personal benefit, academic research will provide you with the most up-to-date, reliable information.

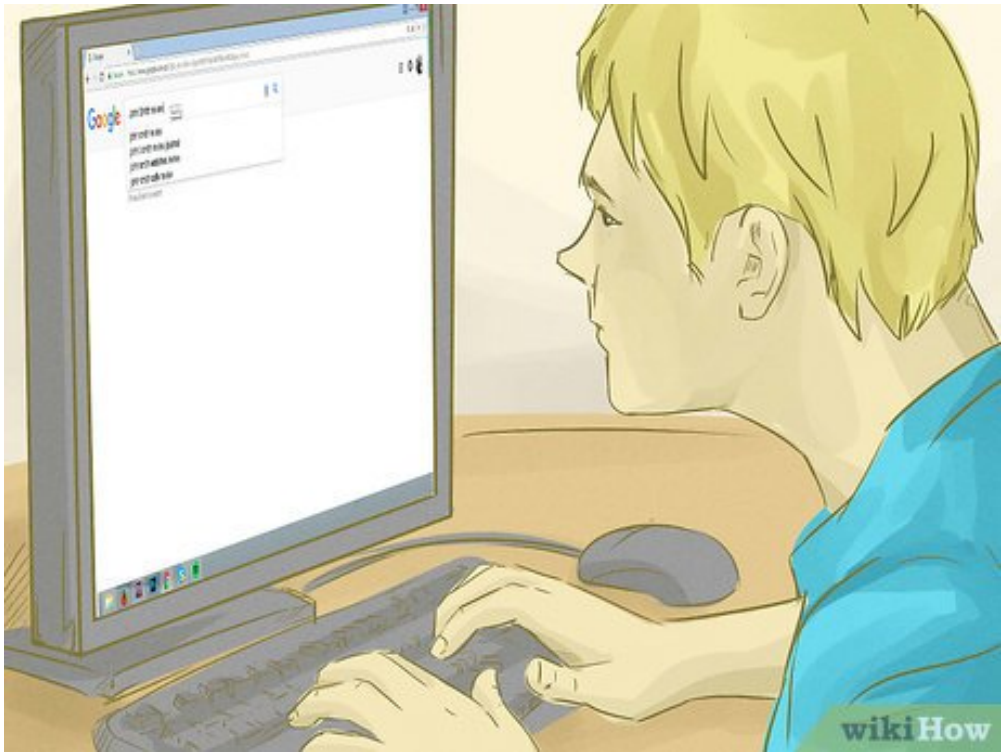
- You can usually access these databases through your home library’s website. Some academic and universities libraries may require a password if you are accessing them remotely (from somewhere other than in the library itself).
- If you don’t have access to a library, try using Google Scholar for your searches. You can find academic research through this search engine, and Google Scholar will show you where you can find free copies of the articles online.

2 **Look for subject-specific databases.** Depending on the area of your research, you have several options for online databases specific to your field. For example, if you are looking for research on education, the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) is sponsored by the United States Department of Education and provides peer-reviewed research and informational materials on education topics.[5] If you're looking for medical or scientific research, PubMed, sponsored by the United States National Library of Medicine, is a great place to start.[6]

3 **Ask a librarian.** If you have access to a library, make an appointment to speak with your reference librarian. These people are specially trained in helping you access the best research and knowledge available.[7] They can help you find sources and also help you determine whether sources are credible.

4 **Use regular search engines with caution.** Search engines crawl the web indexing pages by reading the words and phrases that appear on those pages. From there, the process is automated. Each search engine has an algorithm that's used to rank results for specific searches. This means that no human is vetting the accuracy of the results. The "top" result is simply the result of an algorithm. It's not an endorsement of the content or quality of the result.

- Most search engines can be "gamed" by savvy websites in order to ensure their content comes up first. Moreover, each search engine has its own algorithm, and some tailor their results based on your browsing history. So the "top" result on Google will not necessarily be the "top" result on Yahoo, even with the exact same search phrasing.[8]
- Be aware that simply because you find information online doesn't make it credible or authoritative. Anyone can make a webpage, and the amount of poor, unverified, and just plain wrong information often outweighs the good stuff online.[9] To help you sift through the useless stuff, talk to your teacher or librarian, and use library or academic search engines when possible.



5 **Choose your keywords carefully.** For any given inquiry, there are an almost limitless number of potential word and phrase choices you could enter into a search engine. Therefore, it's important to think carefully about what you hope your search will find, as well as try multiple different search combinations.

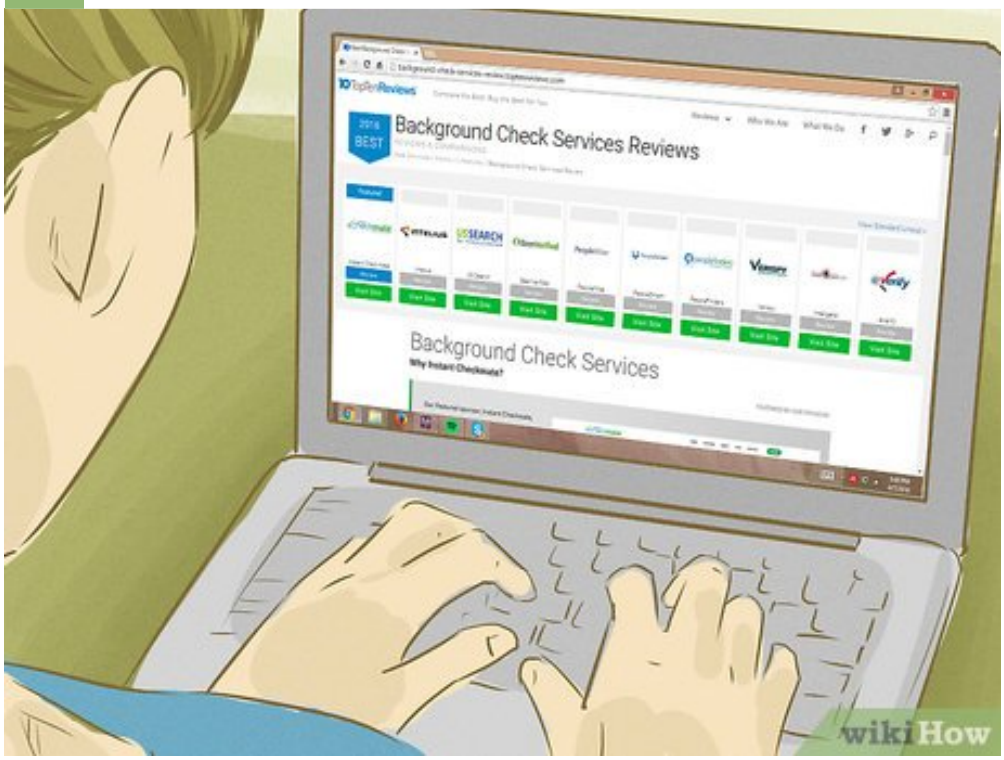
- If you're using an academic search engine, such as your library's search feature, try using a combination of keywords and *Boolean Operators*, or words you can use to narrow down your search: AND, OR, and NOT.[10]
    - For example, if you are doing research on feminism in China, you might run a search for "feminism AND China." This will return results that include both of those topic keywords.
    - You can use OR to run searches for related keywords. For example, you could search for "feminism OR feminist OR social justice." This would return results that contain one or more of those terms.
    - You can use NOT to exclude keywords from your search. For example, you could search for "feminism AND China NOT Japan." You would not get any results that included Japan.
- You can use quote marks to search for full phrases. For example, if you want to search for *academic performance*, you would search for the whole phrase inside quotation marks: "academic performance." Be aware, though, that using quotation marks will kick out any result that isn't an exact match. For example, you would not get results about "school performance" or "academic functioning" because they are not worded exactly the way you searched.
- Use specific keyword phrases to locate the most relevant information. For example, if you are looking for information social welfare expenditures in the U.S., you're more likely to get the results you want by searching for "total yearly amount spent on welfare programs in U.S." than searching for "welfare," which would bring up definitions of welfare, types of welfare in other countries, and thousands more results you don't want. Be aware, though, that you can't always find information like this -- the more words you enter, the fewer results you're likely to get.
- Use alternate words or keyword phrases to locate additional research sources. For example, if you are researching "welfare," consider using "safety net" or "social programs" or "public assistance" in place of "welfare" to find different results. In many cases, your word choice might unintentionally bias your results, since terms like "welfare" are often politically loaded. Using a wider variety of terms ensures that you'll be exposed to a broader — and therefore potentially less biased — set of sources.

6 **Narrow when necessary.** If you're researching a topic about which you're relatively uninformed, begin your search with broad terms, then use the information culled from that first search to begin narrowing your search.

- For example, in your search for "total yearly amount spent on welfare programs in U.S.," you'll quickly discover that there are several different public assistance programs, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Use that information to decide which program(s) you're interested in, and then perform a new (more specific) search, such as "total yearly SNAP expenditures in U.S."

Part 2

Part 2 of 4: Getting Good Sources



1 **Look for credible, authoritative sources.** Perhaps the most difficult — and important — task in internet research is ensuring the sources you select are credible. Generally, you want to prioritize information from government sources, academics, and nationally recognized news organizations.[11]

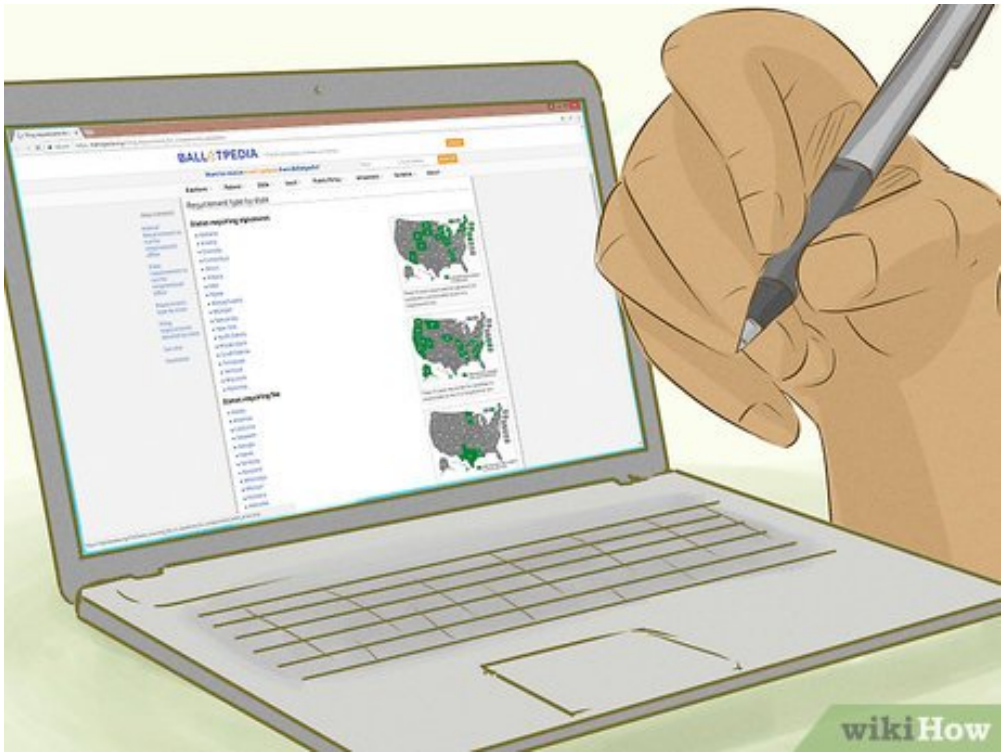
- Government sources will often have ".gov" somewhere in the webpage. For example, the United States Department of State's website is www.state.gov. The official website for Australia's Department of Defence is www.defence.gov.au.
- Websites that end in .edu belong to colleges and universities. However, you do need to be careful with .edu sites, because often faculty and students can run personal webpages that will have the .edu extension, but the information there may not be vetted by the university.[12] It's better to find academic sources through an academic database or search engine, like EBSCOhost or Google Scholar.
- Websites that end in .org belong to non-profit organizations. While some of these are highly credible, some are not. Anyone can purchase a website with a .org extension. Check these sites carefully, and don't rely on them as your sole source of information if you can avoid them.[13]
- Major news sources such as The Guardian, CNN, and Al Jazeera tend to be credible, but you also need to make sure you're reading a factually based article and not an opinion piece. Many news sites also have blogs and editorial sites where people can state their opinions, which aren't necessarily backed up by facts.

2 **Cast a wide net.** Don’t limit yourself to the first few results in the search engine. Look beyond the first page of search results to find information for your research.[14]

- While it’s impossible to view all of the results for most searches, it’s important to view at least several pages of results in order to ensure you’re not missing important information. Because of search engine optimization, if you’re using a regular search engine like Google or Yahoo, the first several pages might contain the links that were most effectively promoted, not the ones with the best information.[15]

3 **Wikipedia can be a good place to start, but websites such as this are open to editing by anyone, which means that their information can be inaccurate, outdated, or biased.** [16] If you want to use Wikipedia or another wiki for research, scroll down to the “References” section at the bottom of the page and check those out. Go to the original source whenever possible.

- For example, if you are writing a report on penguins, you could start with the Wikipedia page on Penguins. Scrolling to the References section would show you several peer-reviewed academic journal articles on penguins, along with references to book chapters by academic publishers. Look at those sources for more authoritative information.



4 **Find the original source whenever possible.** During your research, you will find many statements online, but not all of them are true or useful. Some sources will not cite any references, or they may twist the reference to say something other than what it originally stated. Don't take anything at face value. Particularly when the website reporting a fact or statistic is questionable, you should attempt to find the original source.

- For example, if you're doing research on changes in welfare expenditures during the past 20 years, there's no reason to trust a blog, or any secondary source. Most credible sources will note that they're using data from federal agencies. Therefore, it's usually better to search for the original government data sources and cite them directly, rather than citing a page that is itself just reporting (possibly incorrectly) the data.
- Citing the original source will also make your own research more authoritative and credible. For example, it is much more impressive to your teacher if you cite an article from the National Institutes of Health (a US government source) than if you cite an article from WebMD -- even if they have the same information. If you can cite the original scholarly research that produced the information you're discussing, that's even better.

5 **Look for consensus.** If you can't find the original source for a fact, your best bet is to verify the fact on multiple, credible sites.

- No matter what information you're seeking, if you can't find a single official source, it's advisable not to trust a piece of information until you find identical information on several independent sites. So, for example, if you can't find an original source for SNAP expenditures in 1980, enter the data you found into a search engine to ensure that the same number is reported on multiple sites and that those sites are not all citing the same (potentially erroneous) source.

Part 3

Part 3 of 4: Evaluating for Credibility

1 **Check the source's affiliations.** [17] Checking who owns or sponsors the website will help you figure out whether it is credible or not. For example, the Mayo Clinic website is owned by the Mayo Clinic, one of the most prestigious hospitals in the world. It is a not-for-profit organization, so it is not out to make money from its content. Its articles are written by medical professionals. These are good clues that information you find on this site will be credible. On the other hand, a "health" website that has a storefront or lots of ads, and doesn't have any institutional or professional affiliations, won't be as credible.

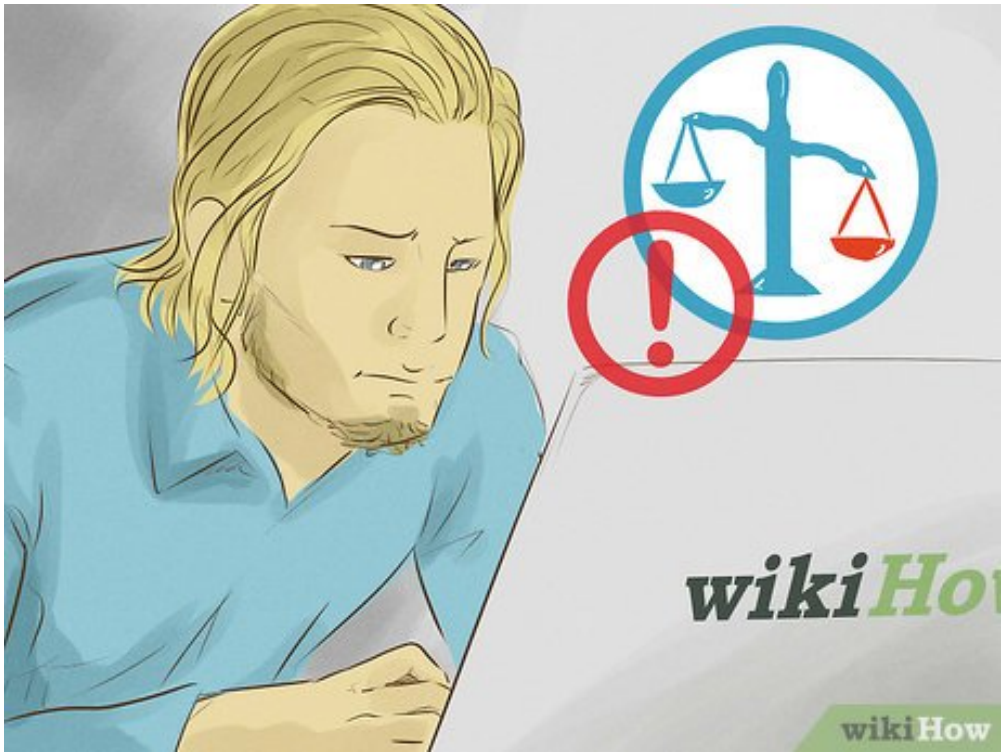
- If you're using an academic database, check out who published the article or book. Texts from prestigious journals, such as the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and books from academic publishers like the Oxford University Press, carry more weight than sources from less-known publishers.
- If you've never heard of a source, the first place to look is the "About Us" (or similar) portion of the website. If that doesn't provide you with a good idea of who's producing the web page, try conducting an internet search for the site itself. Often news articles, Wikipedia entries, and the like that reference a source will include information about its affiliation(s), ideology, and funding. When all else fails, consider using a web domain search engine to discover who owns the website. However, if you've had to go to that length, chances are good that the site is too obscure to be trusted.

2 **Check out the author.** Unfortunately, many internet sources will not list an author. If you are searching online for peer-reviewed research, however, you will usually find sources with named authors. Look at their credentials.[18]

- For example, does this person have education in their field? Neil deGrasse Tyson has a Ph.D. in Astrophysics from the prestigious Columbia University, so it's likely that what he says about astrophysics is credible and authoritative (meaning trustworthy and up to date). On the other hand, an amateur star-watcher's blog will not be authoritative, even if the information is accurate.
- Has the author written anything else on the topic? Many authors, including journalists and academic scholars, have areas of specialty and have spent years studying and writing about these topics. If the author has written many other articles on the same area, this makes them more credible (especially if those articles are peer-reviewed).
- If there is no author, is the source credible? Some sources, particularly government sources, will not list an author. However, if the source you are getting the information from is authoritative -- such as an article on chickenpox from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention -- the absence of an author isn't cause for concern on its own.

3 **Look at the date.** It's important to make sure that your information is as up to date as possible, especially if you're research a medical or scientific topic. Scientific consensus changes with the presence of new studies and information. Check when the article or website was published. Being more than five years old isn't necessarily bad, but look for the most recent articles you can find for the best shot at updated information.[19]

- For example, if you were writing a research paper on treatments for cancer, you wouldn't want to use only articles from the 1970s, even if they were published in prestigious academic journals.



4 **Look for reliability and accuracy.** There are many sources out there that claim to be fact-based but aren't. Websites that appear to have a clear agenda are usually not good sources, because they may ignore or misrepresent evidence that disagrees with their position.

- Look for the site's sources. A credible internet site will cite its sources. A really great site may even link out to the original research articles so you can track them down. If you can't find any references for the information provided, or if the references are out of date or poor quality, it's a good sign that your site isn't reliable.
- Watch for bias. Highly emotional language, inflammatory rhetoric, and informal writing are all signs of potential bias in your source. Most academic writing tries to steer clear of these and aim for impartiality and objectivity as much as possible. If your website uses emotional language like "Manipulative big pharma companies are out to keep you broken and unhealthy to line their own pockets!" it's a good sign that there is bias present.
- Review each website for grammatical errors and broken links. If the website is credible and reliable, grammar and spelling should be accurate, and all links should take you to the appropriate landing page. Websites with numerous grammatical errors and broken links may be copying their information from another source or may not be legitimate.

Part 4

Part 4 of 4: Compiling and Saving Your Sources

1 **Cite your sources.** In order to avoid the same errors made by inaccurate sites, you should always document your sources. This will allow you to return to them later, if necessary, and will allow others (when applicable) to verify your sources themselves.

- Bibliography entries for webpages traditionally consist of the author of the web article or webpage (if available), the title of the article or page, the name of the site, the site's web address, and the date on which you accessed the article or page.

2 **Beware of the ephemeral nature of the web.** Just because a source is there today doesn't mean it's going to be there tomorrow. In order to guard against making your research irrelevant, consider your options for preserving web pages.

- The simplest way to save a webpage as you see it today is to print a hard copy or save it as a PDF.[20] This will allow you to refer back to the page, even if it's moved or deleted.
- Since a hard copy or PDF version will only be available to you, you should periodically check the links in your research if it is published on the web. If you discover a web page has been deleted or moved, you can keyword search for its new location in a search engine or check to see if it was archived by Archive.org's Wayback Machine, which preserves web pages as they previously displayed.[21]

3 **Consider a technological fix.** There are numerous free web browser features, apps, and services that can help you save your sources quickly and organize them easily.

- Using the bookmarks feature of your web browser is the simplest way to save sources. Rather than saving every source in the parent “Bookmarks” folder, consider creating subfolders for specific topics. For example, if you’re researching welfare, you might want to create a folder for “Welfare” in “Bookmarks” and then maybe even create more folders within “TANF,” “SNAP,” etc.

4 **Build your own archive.** Beyond simple bookmarking features and apps, more advanced research software and services can help you create your own personal repository of sources.

- Numerous services and apps have made it possible to sync sources to the cloud, capture images of web pages as they appear on the day you accessed them, add keywords to sources, etc.
- Many of these services, such as Zotero, are freeware created by academics and other open-source advocates. Others, such as Pocket, offer some services for free and charge for others. If you need functions beyond your web browser's standard bookmarking features, consider using one of these sources to make organizing your sources easier.

Community Q&A

Question

What is internet safety?

Community Answer

Internet safety protects you online. When doing research, it may include using only well-documented sources and not sharing personal information.

Helpful 30 Not Helpful 5

Question

When I do research on the Internet, how can I ensure that information is accurate and complete?

Community Answer

To ensure that information found on the internet is accurate and reliable, try using sources you trust. Information is considered accurate if the human looking for them trusts the source as accurate. Also, if you use sources which are USUALLY considered accurate, and you want to ensure the information is good, try finding other sources that support the same type of information. Sources from competing websites who are willing to give the same information is a good place to start!

Helpful 26 Not Helpful 5

Question

Which type of search engine is best for internet research?

Community Answer

It depends on your search topic. You can use any search engine that fits your needs. If you are trying to find peer-reviewed, reliable, academic sources, you may want to use a search engine like Google Scholar though.

Helpful 13 Not Helpful 2

Question

What is the benefit of using credible resources for researching?

Ravenwolf123
Community Answer

If you use highly regarded, respectable resources, the information you get from them is more likely to be correct, accurate, and relevant.

Helpful 7 Not Helpful 5

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This article was co-authored by Megan Morgan, PhD. Megan Morgan is a Graduate Program Academic Advisor in the School of Public & International Affairs at the University of Georgia. She earned her PhD in English from the University of Georgia in 2015. This article has been viewed 226,157 times.

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