

Fact Finding Versus Scholarly Research

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Includes excerpts from Simon (2011), *Dissertation and Scholarly Research: Recipes for Success*. Seattle, WA: Dissertation Success LLC

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Facts are pieces of information that can be independently verified by going to one source such as a dictionary, encyclopedia, atlas, almanac, or a document published by a particular organization. These sources tend to present the concepts at the building block levels, rather than refine and unveil more complex information that is expected in scholarly research.

In many cases factual questions can be answered with absolute certainty. A factual question regarding geography is: What is the capital of Alaska? A scholarly question that would require more in-depth research would be: What challenges did Alaska face when the capital was moved from Sitka to Juneau in 1905? A factual question regarding the law is: What are the legal rights that citizens have when accused of a crime? A scholarly question would be: What inequities are there between different groups of people accused of a similar crime?

Although dictionaries, encyclopedias and the very popular Wikipedia are extraordinarily convenient and, for general purposes, extremely useful, they may contain inaccuracies deriving in large measure from their manner of compilation and their use by the lay public. They are therefore not appropriate [or acceptable] sources

for scholarly research. They can, however, be useful to help gather background information, formulate questions, and point the way to more reliable and academic sources.

When you are consulting source material on a website, keep in mind that the content is usually not peer reviewed, and may reflect the perspective of bias of the site or author. Weblog postings are particularly vulnerable to this problem. In critically assessing web sources, it is useful to employ the CRAAP test:

- **Currency**—How timely is the information? Has the problem or situation changed since the information was disseminated?
- **Relevance**—Does the information relate to your needs?
- **Authority**—Who or what is the source of the information? How credible and authoritative is this source? Does it come from a highly regarded or ranked outlet?
- **Accuracy**—How reliable is the information? Has it been validated by any outside source or review?
- **Purpose**—What purpose does the site fulfill? Is there potential or real bias present in the information provided or how it is summarized?

See <http://www.gettysburg.edu/library/research/tips/webeval/> for a further discussion of the CRAAP test.

Scholarly research involves consultation with peer-reviewed scholarly journals and books to explore theoretical concepts, which, according to Neuman (2005) “are thought through, carefully defined, and made explicit in a theory (p. 53).” Research articles in scholarly journals rely on established empirical methods to collect data, and are either based on theory or derive a conclusion that challenges or extends theory. Such articles go through a rigorous process of peer review, and will not be accepted for publication unless reviewers and the editor of the journal or book believe the article and its conclusions are credible, based on accepted methods, and make a substantive contribution to the literature. This is not required for information obtained through professional or lay journals, popular magazines, newspapers, or trade journals.

A quick guide on identifying scholarly journals is found on this YouTube video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDGJ2CYfy9A>

References

Neuman, W. L. (2005). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Simon, M. K. (2011). *Dissertation and scholarly research: Recipes for success* (2011 ed.). Seattle, WA: Dissertation Success, LLC. <http://www.dissertationrecipes.com/>