

# Assessing the quality of evidence

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## Why do we need good quality evidence?

As a student, you will want to have access to the best quality evidence to support arguments and positions that you want to make in your assessment. The breadth and depth of evidence available online is staggering and it can become very difficult to discern the good from the bad. It can be even more difficult to demonstrate to your tutor or the reader of your assessments (who may not be the same person) that the evidence you present has come from a good quality source.

Most of us turn to the internet for information on anything from recipes to bus and train timetables and for this sort of thing, the internet is fine. However, as a student, you will want information from credible sources. It is important to understand that there are good quality sources of evidence and poor quality sources of evidence out there and we need to make a choice about what is good quality and what is poor. This is a skill that you will hone during your course of study.

## The role of a student

As a student, your job is to read. A university has been described as a library around which academics gather. A degree is read, not studied.

During the course of your studies, you should become ever more familiar with the body of literature around which your subject is based. Your modules are designed to guide your reading in the same way that a traditional face-to-face lecture would. As you move through your academic journey, you will become better at this and have an ever increasing appreciation for the knowledge that is contained within this body of literature. The modules that you follow will help you unlock this knowledge through reading. The assignments that you produce will enable your tutors to assess how well you have engaged with and understood that body of knowledge through the reading that you have done.

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## Good resources and bad resources

Some resources are produced for non-academics. We may be familiar with [NHS Choices](#) and resources and sites such as these are aimed at people wanting information on diseases and treatments and in this sense, they are very good. However, they are not designed for academic consumption. The information within them is often derived from academic sources and it these sources that you should be accessing rather than websites that might interpret them. Anything from journalists should be avoided; journalists are not academics. Often they will take information from academic sources and then 'spin' it to make a good story. Academic objectivity is then lost as is any credibility.

When researchers and academics have conducted a study, they will report it to the academic community in the form of peer reviewed papers published in academic journals. The [UHI Library](#) has access to thousands of these and this is the best place to get your material and evidence from. When writing an essay or assessment and making a statement about something, you need to support it with academic evidence. Trying to support a statement or point with 'evidence' from a non-academic website does not demonstrate any depth of reading or engagement with the literature.

## The consequences of using poor resources

If you want to mention a classic theory or study in your field you should read about it from a good source such as the core text book. You should also read about it in other places as well because having a couple of different perspectives on the same thing is a very good way of understanding the concept. The better you understand something, the better you'll be able to explain it.

If you have only accessed a poor quality resource, the chances are that your understanding will be poor, as will your explanation. Writing an academic essay or any other kind of assessment is a little bit like baking: if you put rubbish ingredients in (resources) you will have a rubbish cake (essay) at the end of it. An example of rubbish ingredients for a cake would be using the cheapest flour and slimy margarine. That would give you a very poor cake.

In academic terms, this would be like referencing Heat magazine (and yes, this has been tried and very poor marks were awarded!). Another example of a poor source would be Wikipedia. This is fine when you are scratching around for information, but follow the bread crumbs and rather than use the Wikipedia entry; find out what academic resources have been used and then look for them, or something close to them in the UHI library and reference that. Be aware that anyone can edit a Wikipedia reference in most cases (but not all). As such, you have no way of determining whether the information is good or not.

## Being critical

Being critical and being able to critically engage with sources of evidence is a central aspect of study at Master's level. Not should you be able to critically assess and compare arguments, you should be able to consider sources of evidence as being either robustly academic or weak and not credible.

## The importance of referencing

The next step is to show your tutor or the reader of your essay or assessment that you have effectively used a wide range of resources and the way to do this is to reference and cite them effectively. Get into the habit now of using robust referencing protocols. These can be found on the UHI webpage: <https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/libraries/how-to>.

It is essential that you cite and reference your sources properly. This for two reasons; firstly, it shows your tutor or reader that you have done enough reading around the topic and secondly, it shows that you are not making unsubstantiated statements and claiming them as your own! This is plagiarism and referencing protects you from accusations of academic misconduct. **Never** copy and paste whole sections from websites. Your tutor will be very sensitive to this and you will fail any assessment that is substantially copied from an internet source.