

Research and Information Literacy

Collaborator: Ken Liss

Module Overview

1. What is Research and Information Literacy?
2. Different Sources, Different Needs
3. Resources from the BU Libraries

Research & Information Literacy Video 1: What Is Research & Information Literacy?

Welcome to our Research & Information Literacy module. In these three videos, we will talk about navigating and making use of the vast amount of information available to you today at BU and in the world at large.

We will consider:

1. What is research? What is information literacy?
2. What are some of the different types of information sources you can use in research?
3. How can you take advantage of information resources available from the Boston University Libraries?

As students at BU, you will be expected to conduct research on a wide variety of topics for different classes and for different purposes. We will look at some of the many kinds of information available to you and the many ways you can use that information.

Of course research is not just something you do in school. You already conduct research for many reasons. For example, you might conduct research:

- To decide what kind of car or computer or running shoes to buy
- To advocate for a political cause
- To decide where to go on vacation or what to do when you get there
- To look up an actor you liked in a movie you just saw to find out what other movies they have appeared in
- To learn more about a disease that you or a family member have been diagnosed with
- Or, in an academic setting, to raise questions, pursue a line of inquiry, develop an argument, and engage in scholarly conversation.

Research is all about gathering information to make a decision, to increase your understanding or help others increase *their* understanding, or simply to satisfy your curiosity.

Research today is very different than it was 100 or 50 or even 10 years ago. We can retrieve incredible amounts of information on many topics using a computer or even a cell phone, and through many other methods online and offline.

But all of that information presents challenges, as well.

What is the best place to conduct research on a particular topic? How do you know that the information you find is accurate and reliable? How do you organize and keep track of the information you find? How do you incorporate the fruits of your research into the information that *you* produce, whether it's a scholarly paper, an essay, a social media post, a cover letter for a job, or advice for a friend?

You are both a consumer and a producer of information. The more you think about and understand the world of information and research — how to find it, how to use it, how to produce it, how to share it — the better you will be at making informed decisions and helping others to gain new knowledge and to put that knowledge to work.

Research and Information Literacy Video 2: Different Sources, Different Needs

Information comes in many forms: in words, both print and online; in still and moving images; in live and recorded sounds. There are books, magazines, newspapers, and scholarly journals. There are films and videos, radio and television broadcasts, podcasts and social media platforms. There are signs, posters, infographics, and advertisements. There are speeches and interviews. And there are many other ways that information is created and consumed.

Information is produced by individuals and by organizations. A book may be produced by a university press or a commercial publisher. The website you visit could be the work of a giant media conglomerate, an expert affiliated with a university or a think tank, or an individual working in their bedroom. It may be intended to inform or to persuade, to sell or to entertain.

In academia, different types of information can be used in different ways: as background information to establish facts; as exhibits or evidence to be analyzed or interpreted; as arguments to be affirmed, disputed, extended, or refined; and as examples of a method or theory you can use as a critical lens for your own argument.

Which information is best when you are researching a topic? There is no single answer. It depends on the purpose of your research. But when it comes to scholarly research in support of an academic argument there are several key questions to ask about a source:

- **Who is the author?** What are the author's credentials? What is the author's educational background? Has the author written other works on this topic?
- **How current is the information?** When was the information produced? Has it been superseded by new information?

- **Is the information provided backed up by facts or is it opinion?** Is it based on reasonable evidence? Can you verify the information you've located by finding it in other sources?
- **Does the work have a particular bias** and does the author make the bias clear?
- **Is the information relevant to your purpose?** Does it relate to your topic or answer your question? Is it at an appropriate level (not too elementary or advanced for your needs)?

The amount and variety of information available to you as a student at BU – and as a person living in what some have called “The Information Age” – can be overwhelming. Finding the right information for your needs can be challenging. But a good researcher takes the time to look at many sources. They note the differences between them and how they can be used to guide further research and to develop an argument.

Research and Information Literacy Video 3: Resources from the BU Libraries

Now that you've learned what we mean by Research and Information Literacy and have seen how different kinds of information can be used in research, let's look the special information resources available to you via the BU Libraries.

When you ask someone today how they do research the first answer is likely to be Google or another leading search engine. Google is a powerful tool for many kinds of research. It can help you find things in seconds that it used to take days or weeks to find.

But having one great tool that performs many tasks doesn't mean it's the best tool for all of those tasks. That's true of a Swiss Army knife, and it's true of Google, too.

Think of it another way: when you shop for clothes do you do all of your shopping in one store, online or brick and mortar? Probably not. You know that different stores have different types of clothing: clothing for different occasions, for different purposes. They have different styles, brands, prices. If you like to shop — or even if you don't — you know to go to different places for different clothing needs. And you don't simply buy the first thing you try on.

It's the same when it comes to research. There are many things that Google can help you to do, many kinds of information you can find by Googling.

You can even go to what might be called a Google specialty store called Google Scholar.

But for as long as you're here at BU — and even after — you'll find that there are many other places to go, other tools that can help you do many kinds of research (academic or otherwise) even better.

A key tool is BU Libraries Search or BULS. BULS is sort of the library's Google: one central place to search for many kinds of information at once. It will tell you where to get books, journals,

films and videos, musical recordings, scores, maps, and other resources physically held in Mugar and all of the BU libraries.

BULS will also give you links to e-books, e-journals, databases, research guides, and literally millions of articles covering just about any topic you can think of. A lot of these articles might come up in Google search results but you won't be able to actually get the articles without paying. Not so with BU Libraries Search where your Kerberos username and password lets you in.

The libraries also provide access to specialized search engines and databases. There are databases for science, engineering, literature, medicine, business, history, and many other subject areas. One of the reasons we have so many article databases is that scholars from different disciplines may look at the same subject in different ways.

It can be confusing and challenging to keep up with, whether you're a student, a professor, or even, like me, a librarian. Fortunately, you don't have to do it alone. BU librarians are your research partners. We're here to help you navigate and make use of the vast array of information available to you.

BU librarians may come to class or meet with you individually. They will answer questions and offer advice in person, via email, or chat.

They'll help guide you through the richness of research resources available to you as students at BU, whether it's about research specific to the topic of your class or about your own individual research topics and information needs.

What will you do with all this information? That's up to you as you explore, gain new understanding, break new ground, and help others by sharing what you've learned. And the Boston University libraries and BU librarians will be there for you whenever you need us. We look forward to working with you and to seeing you in the libraries and on campus.