Research Concepts & Practice
Information Basics

What is Information?

Information is a vast concept. Information includes facts and opinions, truths and lies, observations and gossip. Information can also be transmitted formally and informally. Formal means of communicating information includes books, articles, statistical tables, research reports, DVDs, podcasts, Web documents, signs, cereal boxes, etc. Non-formal means of communication include information you receive through your five senses….things you see, hear, smell, touch, intuit, etc. What does this all mean? It means that there is a LOT of information out there and it's coming from just about every direction!

Consider this vastness terms of the usual strategy of approaching research projects by "finding information" on your topic. Do you want to find facts or opinions to support your academic work? How about observations? Does gossip work as an academic source? Why or why not?

Information vs. Knowledge

How about knowledge? What is the difference between information and knowledge? Below are some distinctions that I have found to be useful.

"Knowledge." *Encyclopedia of Human Intelligence.* Ed. R. J. Sternberg. New York: Macmillan

> Reference. Print.

> " *'Knowledge' may be defined as acquired information (636)."*

Holloway, Mason. *Knowledge Performance: Developing a Knowledge Platform to Increase*

> *Performance – Learn/Do/Share.* Beacon Associates, 2014. Web. 11 Feb. 2014.

> *"Information consists of facts and data organized to describe a particular situation or condition."*

> *'"Knowledge consists of facts, truths, and beliefs, perspectives and concepts, judgments and expectations, methodologies and know-how. Knowledge is accumulated and integrated and held over time to handle specific situations and challenges."*

> *"Knowledge is applied to interpret information about the situation and how to handle it."*

Credibility is Crucial: The C.R.A.A.P. Test

The types of sources you when engaging in scholarly communication are likely very different than the types of sources you use when you are searching the Web for recipes and song lyrics and gardening tips. It is essential that you utilize the best, most credible sources available. On the next page you'll find a standard (and very easy to remember!) set of criterion that will provide useful when determining if a sources is appropriate for inclusion on an academic bibliography:

Currency: Is the content presented current enough for your project? For your specific research question?
Relevancy: Does it answer one of your research questions?
Authority: Does the author have relevant, expert knowledge on the topic about which she is writing?
Accuracy: Is the information provided correct? How do you know?
Point of View: Is the information biased? What does the other believe? What do they want you to believe?

Different Types of Information

Scholarly material is highly specialized and discipline specific. It is produced by scholars whose credentials can be evaluated, and is aimed at other scholars. Scholarly material is often based on original research, using established methodology to supports the author's conclusions. Scholarly sources contain extensive bibliographies, and are often examined (refereed) by a team of peer experts before it's accepted for publication.

Substantive material is geared to any educated audience. There is no expertise assumed, only interest and a certain level of intelligence. Articles may be written experts or by credentialed journalists. The main purpose of periodicals in this category is to provide information, in a general manner, to a broad audience of concerned citizens. Accuracy is valued, and fact-checking occurs.

Popular material is usually written by reporters or enthusiasts and is aimed at the general public. Articles are usually very short, written in simple language and are designed to meet a minimal education level. Popular material is often accepted for publication because editors believe it will be appealing to a wide audience. Minimal (if any) fact-checking.

Format	Scholarly Example	Substantive Example	Popular Example
BOOK	University Press title like *Relationships as Developmental Contexts*	Medical publisher's title such as *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*	Self help title such as *The 4 Hour Workweek, Escape 9-5*
ARTICLE	Academic journals such as *Psychology and Education* or *English Journal*	Magazines such as *Time, National Geographic,* or *The Economist.* Most newspapers.	Magazine such as *Vogue, US,* or *People Weekly*
WEB PAGE	Page aimed at scholars, such as Vanderbilt University's *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*	Page aimed at educated public like *Fisher Center For Alzheimer's Research*	Page aimed at general public like *Wikipedia* or *E! Online*

Primary vs. Secondary Sources

A primary source is a document or physical object which was written or created *during the time under study*. These sources were present during an experience or time period and offer an *first-hand account* or inside view of a particular event. Some types of primary sources include:
- Original documents (excerpts or translations acceptable): Diaries, speeches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, official records
- Magazine and newspaper articles writing about current events
- Creative works/artifacts: Poetry, drama, novels, music, art, pottery, furniture, clothing

A secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. These sources are *one or more steps removed from the event*. Secondary sources may have pictures, quotes or graphics of primary sources in them. Some types of secondary sources include some books and articles, textbooks, reviews, criticism, encyclopedias, histories, etc.

Discipline	Primary Source	Secondary Source
ART	Original Artwork	Article critiquing art work
HISTORY	Slave diary	Book about slavery in U.S.
LITERATURE	Novel	Review of novel
POLITICAL SCIENCE	Treaty	Article on Native American land rights
PSYCHOLOGY	1st publication of research findings	Subsequent article interpreting those findings

Selected Sources of Information

1. **Reference sources:** Encyclopedias, dictionaries, and handbooks are examples of reference sources. Researchers use (and cite) individual entries. Examples include *The Encyclopedia of Psychology* and the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Reference books are found both in print at the library, and in online format via databases like *ABC-CLIO eBook Collection* and *Gale Virtual Reference Library.*

2. **Books (monographs):** A book pursues its subject or theme at greater length and in greater depth than an article. It is usually authored by one person or a few persons. Books can be scholarly or substantive.

    eBooks: Electronic books. A book that has been digitized and is available electronically, usually via the Internet.

    Chapters of book: Some books are edited collections in which each chapter is actually a complete essay written by an individual author. Researchers may use (and cite) one or more of the chapters as a source. Examples include any title from the *Opposing Viewpoints* series and *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*.

3. **Periodicals**: A publication that appears on a continuous and predictable schedule. Examples include newspapers, magazines, and journals. Periodicals can exist in print format, in online format, or both. Online periodical articles are available through databases and via the Web.

    Journals: A research-oriented publication that contains scholarly articles written either by professors, researchers, or experts in a subject area. Intended for other professors, researchers, or experts in that subject area. Examples include *The Journal of the American Medical Association* and *Psychological Science*.

    Magazines: A periodical intended for the general public rather than for scholars. Substantive examples are *Newsweek*, *Time,* and *National Geographic*. Popular examples are *People Weekly, Maxim,* and *Glamour*.

    Newspapers: A periodical issued at frequent intervals (often daily) containing news, opinions, advertisements and other information of current and often local interest.

4. **World Wide Web:** A part of the Internet, the Web is a large network of computers providing information primarily in HTML.

> **Web page:** A single page on the World Wide Web
> **Web site:** An organized set of interrelated Web pages

Major Library Research Tools

I. Library Catalogs

What are library catalogs?
Catalogs are comprehensive lists of all materials an institution owns or to which it has access, including books, periodicals, DVDs, CDs, etc. Catalogs include descriptive information about materials, called "records". Records can include title, author and publication information, as well as information about an item's availability, including whether or not is available to borrow and where in the library the material can be found.

Why use a library catalog?
Use online catalogs to identify material your library owns, where it is located, and whether or not it is available for you to borrow/use.

Many libraries (including MJC) have full-text books available through their catalog, giving researchers access to books 24/7.

Where can I find and use the library catalog at MJC?
The MJC Library catalog can be accessed by selecting the FIND BOOKS link at the top of the Library's home page. The catalog is available via any computer connected to the Internet.

II. Databases

What are databases?
Databases are organized collections of data that allow for the rapid search and retrieval of information. The databases used in libraries most often provide information found in books and periodicals, and are searched using subject headings or descriptors. Users may also search for keywords in specific fields -- such as author and title -- sort results lists by relevance, and limit their search results using various criteria such as date, article type, and/or length of article.

Why use a database?
Use databases to find information about your topic in articles from magazines, newspapers, and encyclopedias.

Databases also provide information in **known** sources. For example, articles from published magazines, newspapers, and journals. The content of databases has undergone a review process and the information is more reliable than information found on the Web.

Often databases provide full-text access to magazine and journal articles.

Many databases have tools helping researchers to cite the sources found within them.

Where can I find and use databases at MJC
Most of the MJC Library databases can be found under the "Find Articles" link on the library's Web site. The default list allows you to view databases by Subject. You can also access a tab allowing you to view databases by name.