Formats and Types of Information

There are various formats of information resources. The most general formats are: print (books, periodicals and microforms), multimedia (videotapes, audiocassettes, slides, and other image and audio formats) and electronic (CD, DVD, and databases).

Types of information sources are often discussed in four general groups (there is some overlap). Each of the following is a link to details about the information type:

- general-specific
- scholarly-popular
- primary-secondary
- free-fee

General-Specific Information Types

When searching for information, it is recommended that a student use background information sources to gain an initial understanding of the topic. First, explore general information sources to increase familiarity with the topic and to gain an overview, and to review ideas concerning the topic's terminology. A general encyclopedia, such as the Encyclopedia Britannica, is often a good place to start looking for information. Most articles are written by experts in the subject, and can be used as a brief overview of your topic.

Then, use more specific information sources as your understanding of the topic deepens, such as subject encyclopedias and books.

Subject-based or specialized encyclopedias, handbooks and directories provide more comprehensive topic information than found in general encyclopedias. Examples include almanacs and yearbooks, atlases and gazetteers and biographical encyclopedias.

Books provide in-depth information on a topic; most are indexed to facilitate searching, and include bibliographies useful for identifying additional information sources. Books, also known as monographs, have been carefully selected by librarians and faculty for inclusion in the library's collection because of their reliability.

Scholarly-Popular Information Types

There are different types of periodicals, such as journals, magazines and trade publications.

The scholarship of an article is important. The highest level of scholarship is a journal article from a refereed serial. An authority (a scholar) in the discipline has written the article, and the article's content has been reviewed (often called peer reviewed or refereed) by other discipline scholars.

A journal article from a "scholarly" or "academic" publication may be acceptable for use in undergraduate research papers. The difference between a "refereed serial" and a "scholarly publication" is that an article in a scholarly publication might not be refereed. Although all refereed serials are scholarly publications, not all scholarly publications are refereed serials.

Please consult with the course instructor as to his/her policy concerning the inclusion of scholarly (not refereed) publications.

Differences between refereed/scholarly and popular periodicals:

Criteria	Refereed / Scholarly	Popular, News, and General Interest
Identification of Document Type	the journal is identified as a "refereed serial" by an appropriate publication, such as Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory	the journal is identified as "trade," "newsletter" or "consumer" by Ulrich's
Authorship	the author is a scholar/expert in the topic of the article	articles may be written by a member of the editorial staff, a scholar or a freelance writer
Documentation	authors always cite their sources in the form of footnotes or bibliographies	authors sometimes cite sources, though not always
Language of the Article	the language of scholarly journals is that of the discipline covered. It assumes some knowledge of the discipline's background on the part of the reader.	the language of the publication is geared to any educated audience. There is no discipline knowledge assumed.
Purpose of the Article	the main purpose of a scholarly journal is to report on original research or experimentation in order to make the information available to the rest of the discipline	the main purpose is to provide information, in a general manner, to a broad audience. Periodicals are usually attractive in appearance, and articles are often illustrated with photographs.
Publisher	most scholarly journals, though not all, are published by specific professional associations	they are generally published by commercial enterprises or individuals
Length	longer articles, providing in-depth analysis of topics	shorter articles, providing broader overviews of topics
Format/Structure	articles usually structured, and may include sections titled abstract, literature review, methodology, results, conclusion, bibliography	articles do not necessarily follow a specific format or structure
Special Features	illustrations that support the text, such as tables of statistics, graphs, maps or photographs	illustrations with glossy or color photographs, usually for advertising purposes
Examples	New England Journal of Medicine; Nature	Economist; Time; Psychology Today

Primary-Secondary Information Types

Primary Source Material:

Original research, eyewitness accounts, and creative works; usually presented in its original form. Serves as information to help us interpret an event.

- research article based upon data obtained from original research
- manuscripts, diaries, letters
- speeches, interviews
- autobiographies

- poetry, music or art
- photographs, audio recordings, image recordings
- objects (such as a painting) and artifacts (such as a jar from an ancient site)
- maps

Secondary Source Material:

Collects, summarizes, reports and interprets primary data or the research of others.

- anthologies
- reference books
- non-fiction books or articles that talk about a subject but do not contain original research
- criticism and reviews, such as literary criticism
- biographies

Free-Fee Information Types

The World Wide Web is a huge network of computers and serves as a convenient source of a variety of information and information types. Sites provide up to the minute news and information about current events, trends and controversial topics. Unfortunately, there is no quality control on the Web; anyone can "publish" anything at anytime. As a result, information is frequently inaccurate or biased, and outdated. Only verifiable information should be used for academic research papers.

Scholarly information is usually not "free" on the open Web. The Sawyer Library, as with any academic library, carefully reviews and chooses the information it acquires (such as books and journals) and provides access to (such as the subscription databases). Librarians make every effort to identify, acquire, and provide only verifiable, quality information resources through our collections to support the curriculum.

The Sawyer Library subscribes (pays for access and use) to dozens of databases of varying types:

- bibliographic: basic descriptive information about indexed items such as author, title, etc. The library's online public access catalog (OPAC) is a bibliographic database.
- indexes: usually arranged by subject, topic or author, are used to organize and identify sources. Most indexes focus on a discipline or subject area. Most of these information types index journal articles, although there are exceptions. Indexes often include abstracts. Abstracts summarize the contents of the source indexed, so you do not have to read the entire information source to determine if it is appropriate for your research.
- journal indexes with some full text content: these popular databases are indexes of journal articles with abstracts and, often, but not always, they include the full text content of the article.

- journal indexes with all full text content: these databases include the full text for all articles indexed.
- full text content: databases based upon other document types such as dictionaries and encyclopedias. Types of full text include:
  - HTML full text with, and without, images (tables, charts, etc). HTML is text-based, rather than image-based. Many articles were converted from print to HTML text in order to provide full text content. Text-based, full text content is cheaper to convert from print than is imaged text (pdf). In some databases, the charts will have been converted to plain text. In other databases, the charts will have been converted into images and loaded into the full text content like an image (picture).
  - PDF full text. The entire source is imaged as it appeared in print.
- numeric databases: databases primarily of numeric tables. Examples include TableBase and StatUSA.
- image databases: art prints, photos, etc.
- audio databases: audio clips, music, speeches, sound effects, etc.
- mixed databases: combination of database types.

***Here is a truism*:** there is nothing you can thoroughly research that is entirely or exclusively available through the Web. Use the Web; just use it cautiously and critically.