

Information: What Is It? How Is It Organized?

As you are reading the materials that we've gathered together for this course, you are assimilating information. What you've just read is information that you will keep in short term memory until you decide if it is worth keeping for a longer time. Regardless of how long you keep it, we will keep it available for you to return to later or for future students to read and assimilate at a later date. We've made arrangements in a computer system to organize and store our information so that it is available for later use. This isn't always the case with information, though. Not everything is stored online, and, even if it is stored online, there is no guarantee that the information that you saw today will still be there next week, and there is no guarantee that the material will be organized in a logical manner that will facilitate your finding it again.



Libraries are repositories of information, information that is stored in books, in magazines, in journals, on microfilm or microfiche, and even in computer formats. Libraries house encyclopedias, multivolume works that arrange information on a multitude of topics in an organized manner. Libraries house magazines and journals, print publications that are published on a routine basis that update their readers on current information on a variety of topics. Libraries, of course, also house books containing information on just about any topic. And, of course, as digital formats bring about new ways of storing and finding information, libraries invest in buying or licensing information in digital formats. So information can be located in a variety of formats and libraries store and help you find information. So, what is information?

What Is Information?

Well, in human terms and in the broadest sense, information is anything that you are capable of perceiving. This can include written communications, spoken communications, photographs, art, music, nearly anything that is perceivable. This really includes an enormous assortment of stimuli, but, realistically, everything you come in contact with is capable of providing and does provide you with some sort of information. So you are essentially a minute organism afloat in a sea of information. For this course, and for the academic climate in which you are now situated, you'll focus on information as materials that have been stored in one manner or another that can educate you to a better understanding of your world. Information, then, is anything that can be documented in any form that can then be referred to later as means to understanding and to building new information. This course, for example, provides you with information that will help you to find, sort through, and interpret other information. In short, you have quite an undertaking ahead of you, since there is so much information to be had.

How Is Information Organized?

If you consider information in the sense of anything that stimulates the senses, then you won't necessarily find any organization. Your experience of the world may have some organization to it in that

you plan trips and relationships and other daily activities, but you still have little control over what information you will receive even with the best planning and even in the most controlled environments. Even people living under restrictive political systems receive information that they are not supposed to receive. That's just the way things work. Information is one thing that no one has ever figured out how to kill.

If you examine information in terms of this course and academia, then you can limit your focus and find patterns of organization for most of the information that you will need to find and use.

Traditionally, in libraries, information was contained in books, periodicals, newspapers, and other types of recorded media. It was accessible through a library's catalog and with the assistance of indexes, in the case of periodical and newspaper articles. Much of this is still true, but the means by which you discover organization have changed. You no longer consult a card catalog for information about a library's collection of information. You no longer have to consult a printed *Reader's Guide* for information on where to find articles about a certain subject. Most of these previously time-consuming tasks have been sped up by computerized "information systems." You still can find information stored in libraries, and it is very well organized. You still can find information stored in periodicals, newspapers, and other media, and these sources of information have their own systems of organization. The problem for most researchers is not that the information doesn't exist in a library or in a journal or in a magazine or in a motion picture, but that they have yet to discover the organizing principles that are designed to help them find the information they need.

For library materials, the organizing principle is a detailed subject classification system available for searching in an online "catalog." For journal articles, the organizing mechanism is typically an online indexing and/or abstracting system that allows researchers to access information by subject or by some other scheme. For newspaper articles, the organizing mechanism is typically an online indexing and/or abstracting system that allows researchers access in a variety of means. The one thing common to all of these access systems is organization. People, experts in their fields, have taken the time and trouble to organize access to all the stored information that they can get their hands on in order to make it searchable and accessible to other people. In short, accessing good information is not just as simple as pointing your browser to Google or Yahoo. Computers can help you to organize information and can even automate indexing and cataloging, but in most library and research database systems accesses to information are ultimately created by other people. In short, finding information deliberately rather than serendipitously relies on many people describing myriad bits of information in a systematic manner that can be addressed consistently in an organized system.

Fortunately for researchers, this organizing drive has been characteristic of people throughout history. History, itself, is something people have created and kept, hopefully as a means for teaching future people what to do and what not to do. So, when you click your mouse on a resource on the Internet and think that it is so incredibly wonderful, keep in mind that it is even more wonderful than you can imagine, but that there are also even better ways to find reliable information than just following any link that anyone happens to stick on the Internet.

Yes, you can find a myriad of sources of information online for free, but many of the materials that you can really count on are not freely available, so you need to rely on organization and cataloging and indexing to take advantage of those "heavy duty" sources. And you can rely on libraries to continue to provide you with materials that you may never be able to access freely on the Internet. Information and organizing information is what libraries are about.