Evaluating Database Search Results

You’ve done some searching in various databases and have a list of results. Your list consists of bibliographic citations. Now what?

Look at your citations. You can tell a lot about an article just by evaluating the title, author, source (or journal name), and publication data.

Title of the Article
☆ Your list of citations will show this as a web link (usually in blue)
☆ Is it appropriate to your topic? Keyword searches can often produce results which are way off target.
☆ Evaluate the language. Is the title more formal or colloquial in nature? For example: a basic search in Academic Search Premiere will give such varied titles as
   - *The Price of Perfection* (an article from Newsweek),
Which of the above titles uses more “academic” language? Which one would be harder to read? Which one is more likely to be written by a researcher or expert in the field? Which article would you rather read for enjoyment or entertainment?

Author
☆ Look at the record in the database. Is there a link to the author’s name? When you click on it, does it appear as though he/she has published more than just this article on this topic? Has your instructor mentioned this author?
☆ Go to the bottom of the article. Are the author’s credentials listed there? What is their educational background? Some databases will provide the author’s affiliation along with other citation information. This might explain whether they work for an agency, corporation, a university, or some other entity.
☆ There may be no single name, but a “corporate author”, such as a government agency, corporation, or organization (such as Greenpeace) who sponsored the article.
☆ Try an author search in other databases and catalogs for an overview of their other publications. An unsigned article is probably a clue the article’s intent is to entertain, not inform.

Now ask yourself the following questions:
   - Is the author biased?
   - Trying to sell something?
   - Trying to entertain?
   - Is he/she presenting new information?
   - Is he/she offering a new theory?
   - Is he/she being critical or trying to influence my opinion?
Journal Name
☆ Think about the difference between popular, trade, and scholarly (or peer reviewed) publications. Many databases will sort your results by these categories
☆ Most databases will identify the journal title as the "source"
☆ If you need help distinguishing between publication types, refer back to the handouts which describe their differences.
☆ Often you can tell if a publication is scholarly or popular just by thinking about its name. For example, The Journal of Sex Research is an academic or scholarly publication, Glamour obviously, is not.
☆ Do the journal titles make sense, given your initial search terms, or do you need to re-think your search?
☆ Most databases will allow you to do a publication search. Often you can get a description of the journal or magazine under publication search which will describe what audience the publication is geared towards and whether it is peer-reviewed.

Other Publication Data
☆ Date. Are there restrictions on the age of the research you are required to use? Your results will most likely be sorted by date with the most current listed first. Currency is critical in certain disciplines, such as medicine, but less important in others, such as history.
☆ Pages. When looking at your results, note that “p. 32” does not mean 32 pages; rather the article starts on page 32 of the print version of the publication. Generally speaking scholarly articles will run much longer than popular articles.
☆ Abstract. An abstract is a brief summary of the article. An abstract can give you additional search terms, and give you hints about the relevancy of your search. Be aware that sometimes all your results will provide you with are citations and abstracts, without the full text of the article.
☆ Documentation. Does the author provide their own list of references of works cited? Scholarly or peer reviewed articles almost always include bibliographies or works cited. Are any of these references useful to your research?

Other Questions to Consider
☆ Was your search too broad or narrow? Do you need to re-think your search strategy?
☆ Are you searching in a database that’s appropriate to your subject or discipline?