Tim
So it is true! Indigenous people from the Arctic have 100 different words for snow. That's an amazing fact! Or is it!??

Everybody knows that we can use digital resources to find information we need. Think about how many times we do this in a day… What's the next train home? What will the weather be like tomorrow? What messages have I received from my tutor on my distance learning course? We all use online information services, but are we using them effectively? Hmmm. We need to think about effective ways to search for information.

Today, we are looking at using the internet to search for information and do research for our distance learning studies. But the internet is so full of so much information: what is the best way to find information – and how far can we trust what we find?

Think about all the ways you find information online. You probably use a search engine like Google or Bing or one that is popular in your country. Search engines are fantastically useful, but they usually show links to other websites, so you need to critically evaluate those sites to know if the information there is reliable. Imagine if you used incorrect information you found online in one of your university assignments. You won't get good marks like that.

Luckily, your academic institution may provide you a list of trusted sources. As a good distance learner, you are expected to do additional research to find additional information, so you need to critically evaluate what you find online. As well as websites, many people now use social media as a source of information. We need to be even more critical here to avoid incorrect, false or even deliberately fake information. It's a good idea to question everything you find online, in all areas of your life – as well as for your distance learning needs!

So, why should we be so cautious when using online for searching for information? To put it simply, you could easily find incorrect information. If the information you find is wrong, then you will get poor marks in your assignments.

Just the same as if the train times you find online are wrong, you could be in for a long walk home! So, let's talk about how to make sure you are finding and using information online correctly. Firstly, you need to build up your list of trusted sources. These are sources that you know have a high level of credibility. Your tutors can help you with this, but you also need to be able to evaluate sources you find online.

Many distance learners use online forums and wikis such as Quora, Yahoo Answers and
Wikipedia to find information. For everyday life these can be useful resources. But for distance learners they should only be used as a starting point for study. You can research more fully by going to the sources referenced in articles on sites like Wikipedia. If they are reputable then you can use them as a resource. You can also use academic search engines such as Google Scholar or REFSEEK.

Similarly, we need to avoid untrusted sources. Unfortunately, social media is full of examples of incorrect information. So: just because somebody posts a story on social media, don’t just accept it as fact – you need to do more research to see if the information is credible.

Another important aspect of online research is avoiding online plagiarism. Plagiarism is an important word for all students. It means 'taking other people's work and claiming it is your own'. This is a serious matter in academic study and can result in serious consequences. It’s fine to look at other people's work and use it as a source, but you have to cite your references. This means stating exactly where the information has come from: another important skill for students! Citing references is a requirement for all academic institutions, so your distance learner provider will supply you with guidelines on how to do it.

So that’s an introduction to finding information online. There is a world of resources out there, but always be careful in how you use it!