How does Information Evolve?

It’s important to understand the information cycle because it affects where you will find information on a particular topic. For instance, information about AIDS is much further along in the cycle than information about the recent Ebola crisis, because it has been around for much longer. Therefore, there will be more books and encyclopedia articles about AIDS than about the crisis. Here is a timeline of how a story or event evolves through the media. For example, think about where you get your information during and after an election:

**Newspapers**... at least by next day; probably earlier

Information usually appears here next, although generally not until a day after the event at the earliest because of their publication cycle. The information is usually a little more detailed and potentially more accurate than earlier sources.

The day after an event you can read all the coverage in the newspapers.

↓

**Magazines**... week or weeks later

Information usually appears here a week to two weeks after an event. It will likely be more detailed than newspaper accounts.

Within the next couple of weeks, most of the weekly newsmagazines will also carry coverage of the news story.

↓

**Scholarly Journals**... months to years later

Research by the experts and analysis of an event usually appears here six months to a year after an event, both because of the time it takes scholars to do the work and because these publications appear less frequently (sometimes only four times a year).

↓

**Books**... years later

Quality information usually takes a year to two years to appear in book form (not counting “unauthorized accounts”), because of the length of time required to research and write a work of this length, and because it takes quite a bit of time to publish.

It will take several months to years before academics and researchers study the event and write about it in scholarly journals and books.

↓
Reference Books... years later

Information usually takes quite a while to appear here, partly because these sources often wait for knowledge to become fairly well-established before acknowledging it, and partly because they’re only published once every several years.

Sources of Information

Use a website to:

- find current information
- find information provided by the library over the Internet
- find both expert and popular opinions
- find both expert and popular opinions

Use a newspaper to:

- find current information about international, national, and local events
- find editorials, commentaries, and expert, or popular opinions

Use a magazine to:

- find information or opinions about popular culture
- find up-to-date information about current events
- find general articles written for people who are not necessarily specialists in the topic area

Use a journal:

- when doing scholarly research
- to find out what has been studied on your topic
- to find bibliographies that point to other relevant research

Use a book:

- when looking for a lot of information on a topic
- to put your topic in context with other important issues
- to find historical information
- to find summaries of research to support an argument

Use an encyclopedia:

- when looking for background information on a topic
- when trying to find key ideas, important dates or concepts