Evaluating Sources

The basics

1. Think critically! Don't accept everything you read or hear as true.
2. Instead of "Is this a good source?" ask "Will this source help me?" It's rare that you can say a book or article is universally appropriate or relevant, so focus on whether it's useful to you in this context.

Accuracy

Is the information in this source correct?

Look for other sources that confirm or agree with the original’s claims. Make sure those sources are also reliable… and that they don’t simply point to your first source for evidence!

Is the source internally consistent? That is, do the authors contradict themselves? If everything within the source doesn’t hang together logically, that’s a red flag!

Is the information cited?

When your source makes a claim that demands some sort of justification, (1) it should provide a citation or reference (for webpages, this is often a link to another article or site) and (2) you should check that the referenced source has been accurately represented – that it says what your first source says it does.

Authority

Who are the authors?

Can you easily identify who is responsible for the book, article, or other source you’re evaluating? For webpages, note that there’s often a difference between the website designer and the writer/creator of the page content.

Look for credentials. Why are these authors qualified to write on this subject? Have they published anything else on the same topic?

If your source is a webpage, is there a way to get in touch with the author, such as a contact form or e-mail address? (This may be a sign that the author is willing to take responsibility for what s/he has written.)
Who is the publisher?

If your source is a book, was it published by a commercial publishing house or a university press, or was it self-published? If you’re not familiar with the publisher, try a basic Internet search to get an idea of its reputation.

For articles, use the guidelines elsewhere on this page to determine if they’re from scholarly, popular, or trade periodicals.

With webpages, URLs can give you some clues. It’s pretty easy to get a .com, .net, or even .org address, but .gov, .mil, and .edu domains are fairly restricted. That doesn’t mean that every .edu website is valuable and no .org sites are, but the address can provide some cues about a site’s purpose even before you visit it.

You might also check if the website is linked from other, reputable sites.

Is the tone authoritative?

Is the source relatively free of grammatical and spelling errors? This may suggest it was carefully edited before publication.

Is professional or academic language used when appropriate? If so, the authors likely intend that you take it seriously (but that doesn’t mean you have to). On the other hand, excessively formal language may suggest the author is being facetious.

Coverage

Who is the target audience?

Imagine trying to follow a recipe written for experienced chefs if you don’t know how to boil water. Now imagine teaching a graduate-level biology class using a fourth-grade science textbook. Clearly, a source’s intended audience has a major impact on its content and, therefore, its suitability for academic use. Pay attention to clues like reading level, design elements, and headings (e.g., “For Kids”).

When researching organizations, be aware when information is meant for clients, investors, or donors.
What is the level of detail?

Does this source cover a time span and geographic range appropriate to your needs? For instance, if you’re making an argument about the current U.S. political climate, a source about Florida in the early 2000s may be too narrowly focused to be very useful.

Is the source focused enough to help you? If you need detailed information about Susan B. Anthony, a 10-page pamphlet on “50 Important American Women” isn’t going to get you far.

Is this a primary, secondary, or tertiary source? Often, all three will be appropriate, but don’t expect a political speech (primary), a pundit’s analysis of the speech (secondary), and an encyclopedia entry about the speaker (tertiary) to offer the same kind of information.

Currency

When was this source created?

Be especially careful with books: there may be several different publication and copyright dates. Typically, the earliest of these is closest to the date the book was written, but you may have a later edition that has been updated. An anthology (a collection of different works) will have a publication date, but you may also be able to find dates for each component piece.

For webpages, look for a “last updated” date if you suspect content may have been edited since its original creation. Be careful, though: that copyright range at the bottom of a page may apply to the whole website, not the specific page you’re viewing.

Does the source reflect recent developments?

In some cases, you need the most current information available. If you’re researching cutting-edge medical treatments, Internet access trends, or the legal status of same-sex marriage, even five-year-old sources may be outdated. (And you certainly don’t want to refer to a public figure in the present tense if that person just died!) Search for your topic in a newspaper database to find out what major developments have occurred in the past few years.

A webpage with lots of broken links is probably not currently maintained, so check elsewhere for current info.
Bias and objectivity

Why was this source created?

"Bias" encompasses more than blatant favoritism or one-sided representation of an issue. When evaluating for bias, consider both what the source is trying to do – inform, persuade, entertain, sell, etc. – and whether the authors honestly represent their intentions. (For instance, does a webpage claim to be "factual," but its author uses only emotional appeals to argue its points?) Don't feel you have to dismiss a source out of hand at the first hint of a bias – just be realistic about what type of information that source can provide.

Likewise, be wary of sources claiming to provide objective or impartial information: this intent may or may not be borne out in fact. It’s your job to be critical of all sources.

Where does the money come from?

Look for affiliations with political organizations or for-profit companies (especially on websites). Keep in mind that such sources are unlikely to include anything that would counteract their political or commercial agenda.

Are there advertisements in the source? Would that publication be hesitant to publish anything that might upset its advertisers?

Particularly in reports of research, is the source of funding openly acknowledged? If not, is there a good reason for this lack of transparency?