
Evaluating Information Sources

It is important to evaluate the information you find. Not all sources are written or reviewed by experts. **This is especially true with Internet sites, where anyone can publish information without quality review.**

Consider the following when evaluating information:

Accuracy

HOW was the resource written?

- As a report, factually?
- As an opinion or column, with a point of view?
- As propaganda, highly biased? Balanced perspective?
- Are sources cited? Is information verifiable?

Audience

WHY was the information published?

- To inform? Will the content support an informational paper?
- To explain? Will the content support an informational or position paper?
- To persuade? Will the content support a position paper? Compare & contrast an issue?
- To sell? Will the content support a position paper?

WHERE is the source found?

- Recognized publication? Is the information from a respected or known publisher?
- Respected organization? Is the information neutral, offering different points of view or suggest certain biases that you need to consider?

Authority

WHO is responsible for the information in the source?

- Who is the author? What is the reputation of author/organization? Is it written by an expert? (For Web sites, domain names ending with .edu or .gov are considered better research-oriented sites than .com or .org domains.)
- Affiliation? Is it published to represent a certain viewpoint?
- Organization? Does it indicate or result in a specific bias?
- Any reviews written or awards received of author's works?

Currency

WHEN was the source published?

- Is it up-to-date enough for your needs? How current should the information be?
- Does the source provide enough historical information for the time period?
- When was the item last revised? (For Web sites, are there lots of "dead links"?)

Scope

WHAT is the subject of the source?

- Does it relate to your topic?
- Does the preface or introduction state a purpose and address your issues?
- Does the table of contents or index indicate sufficient topic coverage?
- Is there sufficient breadth and depth of coverage on your topic?

Evaluating Information Sources—Part 2: On Accuracy and Validity

Evaluation should always be a key step throughout your research.

Whatever you read, watch, or listen to, keep in mind the following six guiding principles:

1. **Always think actively and critically as you read**
Does the argument you are reading make sense?
2. **No one is perfect**
Everyone makes mistakes, even those whose research is accepted and published.
Again, does the argument make sense? Does the data presented support the argument?
3. **"Unbiased information" is an oxymoron**
Everyone has an opinion or an agenda. How subjective is the presentation?
4. **Never assume**
Make sure the opinion you read is backed by facts.
5. **Appearances can be deceiving**
What has been presented? What has not been presented?
Make sure that ALL the pertinent facts are presented in an argument, not just one side.
Good research involves no cherry-picking.
6. **A house stands or falls on its foundation**
Look at the sources cited by the writer. Are they reliable, reputable, objective sources?
If the writer is addressing a current issue or using data to support a position, is the information coming from current sources?