

EVALUATION CRITERIA

There's a lot of information out there, not all of which is trustworthy. Learning how to evaluate the quality of the information you use is an important skill you need both in the academic setting and in life. Most people evaluate information everyday, such as deciding what car or home to buy, where to eat, what features to get on a cell phone, or which doctor to visit. The process of evaluating information for academic research is similar. There are specific things to consider when you decide whether or not to use a piece of information. Information may be considered "high quality" if it meets all or most of the following criteria:

- **relevance** **
- **accuracy/credibility of the content**
- **author credibility**
- **source credibility**
- **references/documentation**
- **objectivity or bias**
- **currency**

Different instructors will use slightly different versions of this list in their courses. Be sure to follow assignment directions carefully when asked to evaluate sources!

You will use this same checklist for books, articles and information you find on the Web; however, you will focus on slightly different things depending on the type of information you have. For example, you might look at the publisher for books, but for articles you'll look at the magazine, newspaper, journal, or web source it came from. You look at the author(s) and their affiliation for ALL sources.

It can be tempting to use the most convenient source, or a source that pops up on the first page of a *Google* search. However, this is a good way to fail an assignment. Use the lists of questions provided below to ensure you are using relevant and high quality sources for your assignments. Also, be sure these sources fall under the guidelines required for the assignment. In other words, if you are only allowed to use scholarly sources, be sure they are scholarly. If you are only allowed to use sources published within the past five years and you are not allowed to use websites, be sure your sources fit those parameters. Last, but not least, don't forget to use common sense!

● RELEVANCE **

Technically, relevance is *NOT* an evaluation criterion. However, this is a very important category, because it is the first thing you need to address: If it's not relevant, don't use it. To assess relevancy, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Is the information related to your topic?** If you are writing a paper on ballet, an article on ballroom dancing won't be useful.
- **Is there enough information?** With very rare exceptions (e.g., statistics or specific facts), you need at least 2-3 paragraphs of information for the source to be useful.
- **How will you use the information?** Will you use it to support your research question? As an example?
- **Is it the right kind of information?** If you are required to use scholarly articles, then articles from magazines and newspapers won't work, and neither will books.

● ACCURACY/CREDIBILITY OF CONTENT

- **Have you found similar information somewhere else?** If you've found similar information in a different scholarly source, it's probably accurate.
- **Does the author provide evidence and examples to support his/her information?** For example, if an author says that people prefer a certain brand of detergent, does he/she provide information from studies and research on the topic?

● AUTHOR CREDIBILITY

- **Is the author an expert on the subject?** What is the source of his/her expertise? Is it education or experience? What is his/her background?
- **Has the author published anything else on this topic?** If so, is it scholarly? If it's popular, is it from a respected magazine such as *Archaeology* or *The Economist*?
- **Is the author affiliated with a reputable university or organization?** If so, what is his/her position and what is the name of the university or organization?
- **Is there any information about the author/webmaster, such as a bio-sketch?**

*** Relevance is not actually an evaluative criterion. In other words, just because something is relevant does not necessarily mean it is a good source. It is, however, the first thing you need to look at before you decide to use a particular source.*

● SOURCE CREDIBILITY

Source refers to the journal or magazine where you found your article, the book where you found your chapter, or the website where you found your page.

- **Is the information in that source peer reviewed or edited?** Edited means at least one other person looked at the information and okayed it. Peer reviewed means 2-3 specialists in the field have approved the publication. Editing is mostly found in popular sources. Peer reviewed (or refereed) is found in scholarly sources. Both indicate the source should be credible.
- **Is there a list of references or works cited?** What is the quality of these references? Are the cited sources scholarly, credible, and relevant? Take a look at the list of references to see what types of sources are cited - books, articles from magazines and newspapers, websites, articles from scholarly journals, government documents, etc.
- **If there are links to other websites or Web pages, do the links work?** Do they link to reliable sources? Are the links relevant and supportive? Are they evaluated or annotated?

● CURRENCY

When we talk about “currency”, we are not talking about money. We are talking about how new the information is. Sometimes this matters, and other times it doesn't.

- **Do you need current information?** If you're writing about the latest treatments for Type I diabetics, your sources need to be pretty current- probably within the past couple of years. If you are writing about the pyramids in Egypt, older material may be acceptable. In general, if you are writing about topics that are changing rapidly, like technology or medicine, you probably need more current information. If you're writing about history, it might not matter as much. However, always ask your professor if he or she has specific requirements for the assignment.
- **Can you tell when the information was created/published or revised?** This can be difficult on the Web. A website or Web page without a date is often not a good source.

● OBJECTIVITY/BIAS

Most information is biased to some degree. The trick is to be aware of the bias and work with it.

- **What is the intent or purpose of the source?** Is it to entertain, voice and opinion, educate or inform, persuade, or sell you a product? Is there a political, commercial, personal, or social agenda? Using sources that have an agenda is ok,

as long as you recognize it. For example, if you are writing a paper on logging in the Pacific Northwest, you might use information from the Sierra Club and from the Pacific Lumber Company. Both will have a different view on this issue, and including both of them will balance your paper.

- **Does the information clearly support only one side of an issue?** Again, the Sierra Club will have a different view on logging than Pacific Lumber Company.
- **Is the author trying to persuade you to come over to his/her view?** A website claiming the Beatles are the best band ever is not a good source of information on bands in the Sixties.
- **Does the information try to show both sides?** How balanced is the presentation on opposing perspectives? Do they fairly present both sides of the story, or do they support one side over the other? Information that tries to show both sides is often a better, but be careful. The author is still picking and choosing his/her information. There can be bias even when the author is trying to be objective.
- **What is the tone of language used (angry, sarcastic, balanced, personal opinion, educated)?** This can give you a hint as to whether or not there is bias present.

SAMPLE EVALUATIVE COMMENTS

Here are some sample sentences used to evaluate sources. When evaluating the quality of a source, remember to ALWAYS provide details and evidence for your comments.

TOO VAGUE

This source was very objective.

This source was current.

This book was well put together.

This is a very credible source.

BETTER

This website provided comprehensive coverage of the current healthcare debate, providing balanced evidence that both supported and refuted the idea of universal healthcare. The sole purpose was to inform the reader with factual, researched information on both sides of the issue. Therefore, it is an objective website.

Since the topic deals with nanotechnology, a rapidly changing field, the publication date is important. This article was published just three months ago, making this a very current source.

This book provided a detailed index, and table of contents, making it easy to find information on this topic. Though the book relied heavily upon medical jargon, the charts, glossary, and tables made the complex concepts easy to understand.

This article was published in *JAMA*, a peer reviewed medical journal.

TOO VAGUE

This author had a Ph.D.

This website is high quality because it is a .org.

The author of this book was well qualified.

This source seemed to show bias.

BETTER

Dr. Smith earned his Ph.D. in electrical engineering from UCLA and currently teaches courses on systems engineering. In addition, he has extensive experience working with National Transportation Safety Board investigations.

The APA (American Psychological Association) is the nation's premier psychological research organization, whose purpose is to create, communicate, and apply psychological knowledge to the benefit of society.

Joe Smith has sixteen years of experience in the public school system, and earned his Ph.D. in educational administration from Harvard. He has written numerous articles in peer reviewed publications on this topic.

This article was mostly the author's personal opinion with the intent to persuade against gun control, and it is therefore biased.



These videos will show you HOW to summarize and evaluate material, and how to write evaluative statements:

Summarizing Sources

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/Summarizing>

Evaluating Sources by Author Authority

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/EvaluationbyAuthorAuthority>

Evaluating Sources by Currency

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/EvaluationCurrency>

Evaluating Sources by References/Documentation

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/EvaluationReferences>

Evaluating Sources by Objectivity/Bias: Part 1

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/EvaluationBias>

Evaluating Sources by Objectivity/Bias: Part 2

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/EvaluationBias2>

This video walks you through the process of evaluating material that you find on the Web, emphasizing Wikipedia:

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/InternetResearch>

This video takes you through the evaluation process of several types of sources, with emphasis on the Web:

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/Evaluation>

This video illustrates the process of evaluating an article:

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/EvaluatingPeriodicals>

This video illustrates the process of evaluating a book:

<https://library.weber.edu/researchandteaching/lib1704/Videos/EvaluatingBooks>