

Evaluating Resources

You often hear about the importance of evaluating sources that you find on the Internet due to the widely varying quality of web sites. It is also, however, important to evaluate **all** resources to determine if they meet your particular information need. Following are some criteria and related questions to consider in evaluating the **quality** of information resources and their **appropriateness** to your research objectives.

Author Credibility

- Who is the author, and what are the author's credentials, expertise, experience, etc.?
- What do the author's credentials tell you about his or her expertise on this topic?

Publisher

- Who publishes this source?
- What type of publisher is it (traditional publishing house, academic press, organization, government agency, dotcom, self-published, etc.)?
- What does the reputation or mission of the publisher tell you about the source?

Objectivity/Perspective

- What is the purpose or main point of the source?
- Is the content primarily factual or opinion?
- Are opinions well-supported by logical evidence?
- Is the source biased? How did you determine this?

Accuracy

- Is content consistent with that found in other sources?
- Is there a list of references included that gives a clue to the extent of research done in preparation of the source?
- Is the source peer-reviewed? *see definition on back
- Are there numerous typos, grammatical or spelling errors that might indicate sloppy work?

Appropriateness

- Are the following appropriate to the requirements and/or topic of the assignment? How so?
 - publication date
 - audience (written for college-level research)
 - depth of coverage
 - relevance to the topic
 - scholarly vs. popular *see definition on back
 - primary vs. secondary **see definitions on back
- Does the source meet any other requirements set by the instructor?

Research Strategies

- Your research strategies can have a bearing upon the quality of information they uncover. Some examples:
 - Full-text periodical articles found in index databases such as the EBSCO and FirstSearch databases are usually more credible than free web sites. If an instructor tells you not to use the Internet for a particular assignment, using full-text periodical articles is okay, because these articles were originally published traditionally in hard copy and have just been digitized and reprinted in these online databases for which the Library pays a subscription fee. The publisher for such articles is the periodical in which the article originally appeared in print.
 - Using a source or search strategy recommended to you by an authority on the subject (like your instructor) or a research specialist (like a reference librarian) is likely to turn up quality information.
 - Web sites that you link to from reputable web sites are more likely to be credible than are sites found by searching by keywords with a search engine.

Helpful Definitions from the *Online Dictionary of Library & Information Science*:

***Scholarly journal:** A periodical devoted to disseminating original research and commentary on current developments within a specific field of study (*example: Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*). Journal articles are usually written by the person (or persons) who conducted the research. Most scholarly journals are **peer-reviewed**, meaning that prior to acceptance for publication, the articles are submitted to a process of critical evaluation by one or more experts on the subject.

****Primary source:** In scholarship, a document or record containing first-hand information or original data on a topic. Examples include original manuscripts, scholarly journal articles reporting original research, diaries, memoirs, letters, interviews, public records, speeches, eyewitness accounts, contemporary newspaper articles, etc.

****Secondary source:** Any published or unpublished work that is one step removed from the original source, usually describing, summarizing, analyzing, evaluating, derived from, or based on primary source materials. Examples include reviews, critical analyses, second-person accounts, biographies, historical studies, etc.

A few other tips . . .

- Research will almost always take more time than you think. It will pay off in the end, however, if you look for the **best** sources, which are not always synonymous with the most **convenient** sources.
- If you are unsure of the quality of an information source, research it further or don't use it. You may need to use not only evaluation clues within the source itself, but outside sources also in your evaluation.
- Need help? Always feel free to ask for assistance from the Reference Librarians.