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Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Assessing and Evaluating Sources

Learning how to evaluate sources can save valuable time in the research process and increase the effectiveness of your papers. This guide introduces you to the things experienced researchers consider when evaluating their sources.

Consider a Source's Purpose and Audience

Understanding the purpose and audience of a source will help determine its usefulness for your research project. A general reference source in a library serves a much different purpose than an editorial in a newspaper, an advertisement in a magazine, or a website providing information about a product or service.

Similarly, sources targeting an audience of experts in a particular field contain different kinds of information than those written for a general audience.

Those written for technical experts assume an audience with a great deal of background knowledge. Typically, these sources skip general treatments of a topic in favor of detailed discussions tailored to experts.

In contrast, sources written for general audiences provide background information for their readers.

Consider a Source's Author(s)

Writers use sources for a variety of purposes: to support a point, to illustrate a range of positions on an issue and to show that they are not alone in their opinions, to name a few. With rare exceptions (such as when you are illustrating divergent opinions), the authors you cite should be reliable and trustworthy. Prioritizing peer-reviewed sources when conducting research is a good way to ensure credibility.

A Note on Field Sources: When conducting field research, you are actually selecting the sources (or "authors") of your information. In the case of an interview, for example, a selected "authority" provides you with specific data and informed opinions on your subject. Similarly, in a study or questionnaire a group of people act as the source/author within a particular setting or environment that you intend to observe.

Similarly, but in a more general sense, you select a group of people to which you intend to distribute a questionnaire or a particular setting or environment that you intend to observe.

Who is the Author? What are His or Her Credentials?

Check the library catalog also to see if the author you are considering is listed in any specialized reference works such as *Who's Who, Contemporary Authors* or *American Men and Women of Science*.

Inclusion in reference works such as these does not necessarily guarantee their trustworthiness, but it will provide you with a more informed idea of the author's background.

When your source is a weekly newsmagazine like Time, Newsweek, or U.S. News & World Report, the author is likely to be a reporter. Though weekly news magazines do occasionally feature articles by experts, and all have solid reputations for careful fact-checking and presenting fair ranges of opinion, be aware that the opinions of editors may be present as well.

When obtaining information from certain online sources, it may be difficult to find and evaluate the author's credentials. If they are not provided, consider emailing the author with a formal inquiry.

When in doubt, carefully consider whether using a particular author's information is worthwhile. Weigh the pros and cons. Ultimately, the best measure of someone's authority is whether their work meets the standards and critical demands of other recognized authorities. Ask your instructor and other knowledgeable experts on campus what they know about the author.

What are the Author's Professional Affiliations?

Expect differences in opinion among leaders of various political parties or types of organizations. An editorial about preserving wetlands written by the president of the Sierra Club will be a lot different than one written by a lobbyist for a real estate organization.

Although it's rare to find a complete listing of an author's affiliations, many periodicals, both in print and online, provide brief descriptions of an article or column's author. Check these descriptions for clues about an author's affiliations.

If you are interested in learning more about them, consider searching online. Many authors have personal homepages on which they list information about themselves, their educational background, professional experience, and personal interests.

What are the Author's Biases?

Every author holds opinions that affect his or her discussion of an issue, opinions that you as a reader must try to recognize and understand. Even the most seemingly factual report, such as an encyclopedia article, can carry an understated or implied judgment. Such judgments reflect an author's bias or preference for one side of an issue over another.

As you evaluate a source, consider whether the author's bias affects his or her presentation of information and opinions. Ask whether this results in one side of an issue being treated more favorably than another. To explore an author's biases,

you must ask where his or her allegiances lie. Is the bias hidden or stated? Ask yourself if you need to look for a balancing viewpoint or approach?

Just because an author has a strong bias does not mean that he or she has written something invalid. Accurate data is accurate data. However, in the interest of being prepared to fend off attacks from those who want to challenge your analysis or argument, it is best if you recognize early on what biases an author might hold.

What if a Source does not identify its Author?

When an author's identity is withheld, as is occasionally the case with newspaper articles and elsewhere online, try to identify the sponsoring company or publisher and proceed from there. An organization can be examined for quality and credibility, just like an individual author.

If you're working with a print source that does not list an author, consider the nature of the publication: is it a nationally respected newspaper or a supermarket tabloid? Is it a brochure or pamphlet published by an organization recognized as a leader in its field? Bias and factuality will vary based on both the nature of the publication and the organization behind it.

Consider a Source's Publishing Bias

As you evaluate a source, consider its publisher. The person, organization, government agency, or corporation that prints or electronically distributes a source plays an important role in shaping its content. Like authors, publishers usually have a bias about a particular topic or issue.

A corporate publisher, such as Microsoft, will present its own products and services more favorably than those of its competitors because the main goal of a corporation is always to make profits. Similarly, political organizations, such as the Democratic Party or the National Rifle Association, will publish sources that contain information in support of policies favored by their respective organization.

Information gathered online and from periodicals are most likely to reflect a publisher's bias.

Strategies for Evaluating a Website

To learn more about the publisher of a website, try to locate its disclaimers. Look for their "site information" or "about" links and examine them carefully. If you are visiting a website sponsored by an organization or agency, find out where their mission statement is located and examine it carefully as well.

Of course, there are a multitude of different kinds of websites online including social media, forums, news sites, and so many others. You should adjust your criteria for evaluating a website based on what its intended use and audience are.

Here are some questions you might ask when evaluating a website:

- Was the site created for particular commercial purposes, such as selling a product or service?
- Is the site devoted to a particular political cause or causes?
- Is the site developed by a particular organization or government agency?
- If you are reading a newsgroup or mailing list, is it a general interest group or one devoted to a particular cause?
- If you are reading a book, what does the name of the publisher tell you about the intended audience?
- Is this publisher known for publishing works in a specific field with a specific political agenda?
- If you are reading a periodical, does it have a predictable point of view? The Nation, a magazine of commentary from a left-leaning political point of view, is likely to give you a different picture of the world from that found in the National Review, edited by conservative William F. Buckley, Jr.

Strategies for Evaluating a Periodical

To learn more about the publisher of a periodical, take a moment to skim through it and note the following:

- **Editorials** - An editorial sets forth views held by the editors and publishers of a particular magazine and they make no pretense of being impartial. Often, they are located in the front section and, since the author's names are on the

masthead, near the table of contents, they may not even be signed. If you find an editorial commenting on an issue with which you are familiar, you may discover the bias of the magazine's publisher.

- **Featured Columnists** - Generally, though not always, the job of a columnist depends on his or her ability to voice opinions congenial to those held by the magazine's editors and publishers. When a dissenting columnist is hired, it is to provide an opposing view. Examining a magazine's feature columns, and the authors who write them, will provide you with valuable insight regarding a publisher's biases and sense of fair play.
- **Lead Stories** - The lead story in a magazine is usually the one placed most prominently in a given issue and its cover will often reflect the particular slant a publisher favors. Skimming the first and last few paragraphs of a lead story will often reveal the writer's overall message. You can then make a decision regarding whether or not to read the entire article.
- **Letters to the Editor** - The level of education and intelligence of a magazine's readers can often be deduced by the letters written to its editor, but the political positions of the magazine's publisher are not always decipherable from them, since many, such as Time, strive to offer space for the airing of a diversity of opinions.
- **Advertisements** - Ads are an excellent guide to a magazine's audience. To whom are its editors trying to appeal? The many ads for office copiers, delivery services, hotels, and corporations in Newsweek, for instance, reveal that the magazine's appeal is to well-educated professionals.

Consider a Source's Publication Medium

As a researcher, you may find that your sources are published in a variety of mediums; for instance, print sources, electronic sources, and field sources.

Questions to Ask about Print Sources

- Is the source relevant to your research project? Is it related to your argumentative claim? Does the table of contents in a book indicate its relevance? Does an article contain an abstract that summarizes its contents?
- What is the purpose of the publication? Is it to sell a product or service? Is it to inform? Is it to publish new research? Is it to shape opinion about a particular issue or cause?

- Who is the author of your source? Is information provided about the author's credentials and profession? Is the author an expert on the topic? Does the author's stance on the topic appear to influence information in the source?
- What can you tell about the publisher? Is the publisher a nationally respected newspaper, such as the New York Times, the Washington Post, or Newsweek? Is the publisher a major publishing corporation, such as Bedford /St. Martins or Houghton Mifflin? Is the source found in an academic or professional journal, such as College English or the New England Journal of Medicine?
- Are your chosen sources documented? Is the information consistent with that found in other print, electronic and field sources?
- How specialized is your source's information? Does it provide a broad overview of an issue? Does it focus on a narrow topic using highly specialized jargon? Will your audience be able to understand key terms from the source? Do you understand the key ideas in the source?
- What is the date of publication? Is the information contained in the document current? Does it need to be? Depending on your topic, it may not.

Questions to Ask about Electronic Sources

- Is the source relevant to your research project? Is it related to your argumentative claim?
- Who is the author of your source? If your source is a webpage, is any information provided about the author? Is an email address provided so that you might contact the author?
- Are the sources of information provided on the website, newsgroup, or forum provided? Is the information you found consistent with proven information found in print sources and on other websites?
- If you're evaluating a website that’s sponsored by an organization, government agency, or corporation, what do you know about the sponsor? Is a bias clearly evident in the material provided on the site? Is this a commercial site whose goal is to sell a product or service? Is this a site that pushes a particular issue or political agenda?
- What do you know about the purpose of your online source? Is a FAQ (frequently asked questions) page available? Is it clear from the site’s content whether or not there is a general bias present?

- How specialized is the information in the source? Does the source provide a broad overview of an issue? Does it focus on a narrow topic using highly specialized jargon? Will your audience be able to understand key terms from the source? Do you understand the key ideas in the source?
- Can you tell when the website was published? Can you determine whether it has been updated recently? Is the information published on the site current or out of date?

Questions to Ask about Field Sources

- Does your source seem biased or prejudiced? If so, is this bias or prejudice so strong that you have to discount some of the information?
- Have you compared different people's opinions or accounts? In general, the more viewpoints, the better.
- Does the information from your source agree with published accounts in print or Internet sources? If not, can you think of a good reason why this would be so?
- Is any of your evidence hearsay, one person telling you the thoughts of another or telling you about comments or actions that he or she hasn't witnessed? If so, can you support or discount your source's view by comparing it with other evidence?
- If an interviewee or questionnaire respondent has told you about past events, has time possibly distorted his or her memory?
- If you have tried to question a random sampling of people, do you feel that they are truly representative? If you have tried to question everyone in a group, have you been thorough enough?
- Have you identified the time, place, and participants in your field research?
- Do you have access to the source? Can you find the time to visit or contact the source to obtain the information you are seeking?
- Have you obtained permission to use information from someone you've interviewed, surveyed, or observed? Have you asked them whether you can use their names in your paper or whether they would prefer that you protect their confidentiality?

Consider a Source's Publication Date

It's very important that the information and evidence you are planning on presenting come from sources that are as reliable, up-to-date and relevant as possible.

Information regarding the most recent discoveries, technical advances and developments in all fields of endeavor are published on a regular basis and you should include them in your research.

If you cite twenty-year-old sources regarding procedures for treating AIDS, for instance, your research would not include the latest findings and treatments in that field. Your information would be dated and not necessarily valid.

When using older materials, do so when their value has held up over time or your research paper specifically calls for the inclusion of an historical perspective.

Consider a Source's Degree of Specialization

Some sources are considered to be general; that is, they are written for a general-interest audience. Newspapers and popular magazines typically provide general information about a topic or issue. In contrast, highly specialized publications are written for specific, specialized audiences such as microbiologists, mortgage bankers, or auto mechanics.

General sources can be helpful as you begin your research, but as your project develops you may need the deeper authority of specialized sources to provide the latest information on your topic. Keep in mind when using extremely specialized works that you may get people in over their heads. Be sure to explain information that your audience needs to understand if they are to grasp the conclusions you arrive at in your paper.

Consider a Source's Role in Your Research

For some papers it may be appropriate to cite an article in a popular magazine, and for others it may be necessary to cite the research findings published in the scholarly journal on which the magazine article was based. So, why use one source over another?

You must consider what role the source will play in your paper. Ask yourself, is the information it contains useful for your purposes as a writer? Does the source contain strong quotations or hard facts that would be effective in your final paper? Is it relevant, in terms of the subject matter and in the way it tackles it?

Remember, what you're looking for is the best possible sources for your particular paper. Ask yourself not only "Will this do?" but "Will something else be better?"

Consider, as well, how using this source in your paper will affect the future direction of your research. Does it contain information that challenges your assumptions about the topic? Does it present any strong evidence against your position that you must then counter or refute with opposing evidence?

Does it suggest a new direction that might be more interesting? Your research project will probably grow and change as you learn more about it. It's wise to check in with yourself now and again to make sure you have a clear direction and if it's the same as you began with, or completely new.

Finally, consider whether a source is directly relevant to your research question. It's surprisingly easy to get sidetracked by a persuasive book, article, or website on a topic that is only slightly connected to the direction of your research.

Consider a Source's Origins: Are they Primary or Secondary?

A *primary source* is a firsthand account written by an eyewitness or a participant. It contains raw data and immediate impressions. For example, primary sources for a large fire caused by a gas leak would include the statements of victims and witnesses, the article written by a journalist who was at the scene, and the report of the fire chief in charge of putting out the blaze.

A *secondary source* is an analysis of the information contained in one or more primary sources. For example, a second journalist, using the article on the large fire and gas leak as background for a story on industrial accidents, or a historian using the same for a book on urban life in the twentieth century are secondary sources.

For most research papers, both primary and secondary sources will be used. Secondary sources are no less trustworthy than firsthand reports. Remember, eyewitnesses can be prejudiced, self-serving, or simply less informed than a later writer who has synthesized many eyewitness accounts.

In writing a history paper on the attitudes of American social workers toward World War I, you might quote a primary source: Jane Addams, founder of Chicago's Hull House, who was a pacifist. If you relied only on Addams' words alone, however, your reader might get the idea that social workers were unanimously opposed to the war effort. To put Addams' views into perspective, you'd also want to include secondary sources, showing that most of her peers did not identify with pacifism and publicly disagreed with her.

When you find yourself repeatedly citing a fact or source, as quoted in someone else's analysis, it might be wise to go to the primary source from which it came. For example, statistics are often used by both sides arguing an issue-often it's only the interpretation that differs. You might find it useful to go back to the original research (the publication of which is a primary source) and learn where the facts end and the interpretation begins.

Consider a Source's Evidence: Is it Accurate & Balanced?

The evidence provided by a source (its information, opinions, and ideas) will tell you a great deal about its reliability and usefulness. As you evaluate a source, consider whether the evidence is carefully put together, complete and up to date.

Consider the thesis, if any, and whether it is supported or defended by the presentation of credible evidence. Ask whether the argument or analysis is convincing. If the source seems slipshod, or leaves several important questions unanswered, you might do better to look for another source.

To evaluate the evidence in a source, ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the author's main point?
- How much and what kind of evidence supports that point?
- How persuasive is the evidence? Does it support your argument?

- Is there any questionable or misleading logic/reasoning?
- Can you offer credible arguments contrary to the evidence?

Working with Field Sources: When working in the field, ask similar questions to those already mentioned regarding the evidence provided and the credibility of its sources. Ask yourself:

- When interviewing someone or attending a public lecture, are the responses provided to your questions consistent with those provided to others?
- Does the speaker or person being interviewed provide corroborative evidence supporting the claims being made?
- When analyzing the results of a questionnaire, are the respondent's answers consistent, serious, and honest?
- When you observe a particular event or setting, do the people involved know that they are being observed? People often change their behavior in those circumstances.

Additional Resources

Chamberlain University Press - 'Evaluating Sources'

John Hopkins: Sheridan Libraries - 'Evaluating Information'

Purdue OWL - 'Evaluating Digital Sources'

Purdue OWL - 'Evaluating Sources: General Guidelines'

University of Maryland Libraries - 'Evaluating Websites'

USC Libraries - 'Evaluating Sources'

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