

Evaluating Information Sources

Critical evaluation of the information you find is essential to conducting quality research. With so much information available, in different formats, from so many different sources, each piece of information that you select must be carefully reviewed to ensure the quality, authority, perspective, and balance that best support your research.

Authority

- Who is the author/creator of the information?
- Is he/she the original author/creator?
- Is the person qualified? What are his/her credentials? What is his/her occupation?
- Is the source sponsored or endorsed by an institution or organization?

Accuracy

- Is the information accurate? How does it compare with other sources on the subject? Is it consistent with what else you know about the subject?
- Is the information complete? Does it provide enough evidence to support its claim or position?
- Were conclusions appropriate based on the information presented?

Objectivity

- Does the source present a balanced view of the different perspectives on the topic?
- Is the bias of the author/creator obvious?
- Is the source trying to convince you of a point of view?
- Is the publication in which the item appears published, sponsored, or endorsed by a political or other special interest group?

Date of Publication

- How important is currency to your topic?
- Is new research replacing older studies or adding to the previous research?
- Does it report facts from the actual time of the event or issue?
- Is it retrospective, providing some review or analysis of previous research?

Scope / Depth / Breadth

- Is the source comprehensive for the entire field of study, presenting multiple viewpoints?
- Is it specialized, focusing on only certain aspects?
- Is it ethnocentric, reflecting the values or beliefs of a certain group?

Intended Audience / Level of Information

- Who is the intended audience... the general public? the educated layperson? professionals? practitioners? scholars?
- Is it written at a level that is understandable and makes sense to you? Consider the vocabulary used.
- Does it build on what you already know?
- Does it include a bibliography or links to additional sources to consult?

Quality of Publication

- Do you know anything about the publisher of the source?
- Is it published, sponsored, or endorsed by a professional association, organization, or society?

Ease of Use / Special Features

- Does the source contain a table of contents and/or an index to facilitate use and find the specific information you need?
- Is it well-organized?
- Does it include a bibliography?
- Does it contain graphs, tables, charts, illustrations, photographs, maps, or other special features that add to its usefulness?

Evaluating Different Types of Sources

Some preliminary review or filtering is often integral to the production and publication process of individual sources. However, different publishers or creators exercise different levels of control over the information they publish. Some of the information for determining a source's quality and authority may be apparent in the source itself; however, some of it may require you to look in outside sources.

Evaluating Books

Most books are initially reviewed by publishers or editors for quality of content and writing style, as well as marketability.

When evaluating a book, check these basic points:

- Author or contact person -- located on title page; brief biographical information may be included in introductory pages or at end of book
- Publisher -- located on title page
- Date of publication -- located on title page
- Intended audience -- determined by examining the content, preface, and introduction.
- Purpose of the information -- determined by examining the content, preface, and introduction.



Evaluating Periodicals

Periodical articles generally undergo review processes, but at different levels, depending on the type of publication.



Newspapers and popular or general interest magazines usually have staff writers who are responsible for writing in certain areas. **Scholarly journal articles** generally undergo a more rigorous peer review process: experts in the subject field review the article manuscript before publication to ensure reliability and credibility. When evaluating a periodical publication, check these basic points:

- Author or contact person – usually located on first page of article; position and/or institutional affiliation may be included as footnote on first page or at end of article
- Editorial board – members, with their affiliations, may be listed on introductory pages of issue
- Publisher – usually located on contents page of issue
- Date of publication – usually located on cover and/or contents page
- Intended audience – determined by examining the content; publication may state intended audience in note on contents page
- Purpose of the information – determined by examining the content

Evaluating Web Sites

Information on the internet is mostly unfiltered, requiring extra caution in selecting reliable sources. Virtually anyone can create a web site on a topic, regardless of their training, education, or experience in the subject field. You may also find e-mail messages and newsgroup postings in your search results, as well as business-related or commercial sites, posted by companies whose primary purpose is to convince consumers of the value of their products or services.



When evaluating a web site, check these basic points:

- Author or contact person – usually located in the footer
- Link to local home page – usually located in either header or footer
- Institution – usually located in either header or footer
- Domain – the last segment of the "root" of the URL (e.g., <http://www.purdue.edu>).
- Date of creation or revision – usually located in footer
- Intended audience – determined by examining the body
- Purpose of the information – determined by examining the body

Find Out More

Following are some additional resources to help you more fully evaluate a source and determine its authority, reliability, credibility, and overall quality.

...about the author/creator

<i>Book / Periodical article / Web site</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Personal web page ▪ <i>Who's Who</i> publications ▪ <i>Current Biography</i> (HSSE, UGRL 920 C93) ▪ <i>Biography Resource Center</i> (http://purl.lib.purdue.edu/db/db168) ▪ <i>Biography & Genealogy Master Index</i> (http://purl.lib.purdue.edu/db/db292)

...about the publisher/sponsor/affiliated institution

<i>Book</i>	<i>Periodical article</i>	<i>Web site</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Writer's Market</i> (HSSE, UGRL 029.6 W933) ▪ <i>Literary Marketplace</i> (HSSE, UGRL 029.6 L71) ▪ Corporate or institutional web page ▪ <i>Associations Unlimited</i> (http://purl.lib.purdue.edu/db/db169) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Magazines for Libraries</i> (HSSE, UGRL 050.25 M2704) ▪ <i>Writer's Market</i> (HSSE, UGRL 029.6 W933) ▪ <i>Literary Marketplace</i> (HSSE, UGRL 029.6 L71) ▪ Corporate or institutional web page ▪ <i>Associations Unlimited</i> (http://purl.lib.purdue.edu/db/db169) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Corporate or institutional web page ▪ <i>Associations Unlimited</i> (http://purl.lib.purdue.edu/db/db169) ▪ Associated links from site

...about general accuracy/reliability

<i>Book</i>	<i>Periodical article</i>	<i>Web site</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cited sources in bibliography ▪ Inclusion in other bibliographies: see <i>Web of Science</i> (http://purl.lib.purdue.edu/db/db257) ▪ <i>Book Review Index</i> (HSSE, UGRL 016.0281 B644) ▪ <i>Book Review Digest</i> (HSSE, UGRL 050 B64) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cited sources in bibliography ▪ Inclusion in other bibliographies: see <i>Web of Science</i> (http://purl.lib.purdue.edu/db/db257) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cited sources in bibliography ▪ Inclusion in other bibliographies: see <i>Web of Science</i> (http://purl.lib.purdue.edu/db/db257) ▪ Associated links from site