

## Evaluation of Informational Sources

### The Four Criteria for Evaluation

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#### **Authority**

This step is concerned with the author's credentials and reputation among colleagues and peers.

#### **Accuracy**

This step is concerned with accurate information and/or facts. Check this information against other resources. Examine the sources cited by the author.

#### **Objectivity**

This step is concerned with the author's point of view. Upon reading information, a reader must observe whether information is presented in a balanced presentation of both sides of an issue or is biased towards one side only. *(While you may not feel qualified to judge research in areas that are unfamiliar to you, evaluating the objectivity of a source involves little more than being critical of what you read and using a little common sense).*

#### **Currency**

This step is concerned with the copyright date. There are some disciplines in which current information is a requirement.

### Evaluation of Books

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- Au:** Who is the author? Is his or her name provided? What makes this individual an expert? Can you locate an author or editor on the title page? Can you locate biographical information about the author or editor? Some books place biographical information on book-jackets. What are the author's credentials? Do he or she hold a degree? Where does he or she work? What else has he or she written? Is the author cited in other sources? Who is the publisher? *(Generally, books are reviewed by publishers and/or editors who examine the quality of content, writing style, and/or marketability.)*
- Ac:** Can the information be verified? Is it well organized? Are the main points clearly presented? Is the research methodology discussed? Does it substantiate other materials read or add new information?

- Ob:** Does the author state the goals for this publication? What side of the argument is the author presenting? Does the author demonstrate a commitment to a single point of view? Does the author acknowledge a bias? Is the author's language free of opinion verbs and appeals to emotion? Is the viewpoint of the author's affiliation reflected in the message or content (*organization's point of view on the topic being discussed*)? Are reasonable assumptions and conclusions stated and supported with evidence?
- Cu:** When was it published? What is the copyright date? Does the work update theories and/or facts from other sources? Has this publication been revised or updated?

### **Evaluation of a Periodical Article**

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- Au:** Who is the author? What makes this individual an expert? Does the article contain a biographical sketch of the author? Is the author's organizational affiliation or current employment addressed? What type of audience is the author addressing?
- Ac:** Is this original research, a review of previous research, or an informative piece? Does the works cited section refer to primary or secondary sources? (Hint: Primary sources are the raw material of the research process; *see Primary Sources handout*. Secondary sources are based on primary sources.) Can this article be used to support or challenge a position taken in a research paper?
- Ob:** What side of the argument is the author presenting? Does the author acknowledge a bias? Are reasonable assumptions and conclusions stated and supported with evidence? Are opinions being disguised as facts? In scholarly journals, does the publication offer information about the association? What it stands for? Its agenda? Does it provide a web address to the association's web site in order to find more information? Examine the advertisers in journals; these ads tend to be more selective and discipline-specific than the type of ads found in magazines, but any advertising in the publication constitutes a financial influence by an outside party on the publisher.
- Cu:** Some topics, such as those in the health sciences or education, require current information. Other subjects, such as geology and archaeology, value older material as well as current insight.

### **Evaluation of a Newspaper Article**

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- Au:** Who is the author? Is his or her name provided? What makes the individual knowledgeable? Remember, newspapers report information from the primary source. And, a newspaper article will identify the author as a staff writer, editor or columnist. Does the author rely on eyewitnesses reporting, consulting officials, or some of both?

- Ac:** How do you verify what he or she reports? Check the article's information against similar articles in other major newspapers or news sources. Does your two-source test confirm or contradict the story? Remember, newspaper articles don't contain a works cited section. Sometimes an interviewee will be identified; however, eyewitnesses can be wrong. If the source isn't an eyewitness, make sure it's a source you can trust like a newspaper that has a good reputation for fact checking. Be wary of any source that is repeating hearsay and rumors. Does the paper seem to be well edited? Does observation identify the use of poor grammar and misspelled words?
- Ob:** Is the information covered fact, opinion or propaganda? First, realize that companies that own newspapers want to make a profit. Marketing is the key to influence readers to pick up a copy and turn them into subscribers. Second, newspaper owners will influence the point of view of their paper and sometimes directly control the content that appears in their publication. Examine articles that pertain to topics of religion and politics; a liberal/progressive/conservative point of view can be identified by how the writer handles commentary on issues pertaining to one of these areas. Are editorials and opinion pieces clearly labeled? Examine the advertisements and news stories. Newspapers survive on financial support from advertisers, and this funding can create a bias and/or ethical complications. Remember, newspapers focus on local information. If predominant support came from one local company's advertising, would the newspaper pursue a story that impacts this company in a negative manner or will they ignore the story, risking their reputation as a quality source in the field of journalism?
- Cu:** Newspapers always provide the date. Pay close attention to newspapers that print more than one edition per day (a lot can happen on a story between a morning edition and an evening edition).

### **Evaluation of a Web Site**

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- Au:** Is an author of the content or a webmaster identified? Does the web site provide information or links to information about the author or webmaster? the company or association sponsoring the web site? Is there contact information for this sponsor (an email address only is not enough)? Is the author associated with an educational institution or other reputable organization? What domain is attached to the web address? Remember, the most reliable domains are .edu, .gov, .int, and .mil, and special qualifications have to be met in order to create a web site with one of these domains. Does the web site explain what their mission or philosophy is?
- Ac:** Can the information be verified? Is the information reliable and error-free? Is there a statement that addresses quality control for information posted on the web site? Does the web page link to other sites known for credible information on a particular topic? Are there broken links? Is there a bibliography (if applicable)? Is the web site under construction? If it is, then obviously the informational content for this web site should be considered incomplete and not a credible source.

- Ob:** Is the information covered fact, opinion or propaganda? Is the web site free of advertisements or sponsored links? Remember, authoritative or reliable web sites normally host their web content independently, whereas, other web sites need a commercial hosting company to display their web pages, and a by-product of this arrangement is the placing of pop-up ads and banner advertisements. Many web sites include a bias because they are pushing an agenda. Personal web sites will promote interests and hobbies that a person deems important. Fan web sites take a position of support for a singer, band, actor, comedian, or other entertainers (showing support indicates a bias). Political web sites support candidates, points of view on foreign and domestic issues, and philosophies of political parties. Although organizational web sites can contain useful information, realize organizations push a bias. Examples: The PETA web site shows support for the humane treatment of animals; The Pro-Choice America web site shows support for a woman's right of choice concerning Abortion. Is the information provided as a public service?
- Cu:** Is the information up-to-date? Does the web site contain a copyright date? Does it indicate when the web site was last modified? Upon reading through the content, are the text and data pointing towards old information? If the content includes charts and/or graphs, does the web site clearly state when the data was gathered?