University of New Hampshire
Connors Writing Center

Evaluating Sources

The word is full of information; however, not all of it is valid, useful, or accurate. When conducting research, it is important to evaluate sources to assess if they are credible to determine their stance. Evaluation is especially important for internet sources, which may be unreliable.

Guidelines for Evaluating Sources

- Read the preface—what does the author want to accomplish? Browse through the table of contents and the index. This will give you an overview of the source. Is your topic covered in enough depth to be helpful? If you don't find your topic discussed, try searching for some synonyms in the index.

- Check for a list of references or other citations that look as if they will lead you to related material would be good sources.

- Try to determine if the content of the is fact, opinion, or propaganda. If you think the source is offering facts, are the sources for those facts clearly indicated? If it is a propaganda opinion, make sure to acknowledge this in your essay.

- Do you think there is enough evidence offered? Is the coverage comprehensive? (As you learn more and more about your topic, you will notice that this gets easier as you become more of an expert.)

- Are there broad generalizations that overstate or oversimplify the matter?

- Does the author use a good mix of primary and secondary sources for information?

- If the source is opinion, does the author offer sound reasons for adopting that stance? (Consider again those questions about the author. Is this person reputable?)

- How timely is the source? Is the source 20 years out of date? Some information becomes dated when new research is available, but other sources of information can be quite sound 50 or 100 years later.

- How credible is the author? If the document is anonymous, what do you know about the organization?

- Are there vague or sweeping generalizations that aren't backed up with evidence? Are arguments very one-sided with no acknowledgement of other viewpoints?

Web Sources vs. Print Sources

It is important to understand the differences between what you can find on the web and more traditional print sources. Some sources such as journal or newspaper articles can be found in both print and digital format. However, much of what is found on the Internet does not have a print

equivalent, and hence, has low or no quality standards for publication. Understanding the difference between the types of resources available will help you evaluate what you find.

Publication Process
Print Sources: Traditional print sources go through an extensive publication process that includes editing and article review. The process has fact-checkers, multiple reviewers, and editors to ensure quality of publication.

Internet Sources: Anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can publish a website or electronic document. Most web documents do not have editors, fact-checkers, or other types of reviewers.

Authorship and Affiliations
Print Sources: Print sources clearly indicate who the author is, what organization(s) he or she is affiliated with, and when his or her work was published.

Internet Sources: Authorship and affiliations are difficult to determine on the Internet. Some sites may have author and sponsorship listed, but many do not.

Sources and Quotations
Print Sources: In most traditional publications, external sources of information and direct quotations are clearly marked and identified.

Internet Sources: Sources the author used or referred to in the text may not be clearly indicated in an Internet source.

Bias and Special Interests
Print Sources: While bias certainly exists in traditional publications, printing is more expensive and difficult to accomplish. Most major publishers are out to make a profit and will either not cater to special interest groups or will clearly indicate when they are catering to special interest groups.

Internet Sources: The purpose of the online text may be misleading. A website that appears to be factual may actually be persuasive and/or deceptive.

Author Qualifications
Print Sources: Qualifications of an author are almost necessary for print sources. Only qualified authors are likely to have their manuscripts accepted for publication.

Internet Sources: Even if the author and purpose of a website can be determined, the qualifications of the author are not always given.

Publication Information
Print Sources: Publication information such as date of publication, publisher, author, and editor are always clearly listed in print publications.

Internet Sources: Dates of publication and timeliness of information are questionable on the internet. Dates listed on websites could be the date posted, date updated, or a date may not be listed at all.

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