

Evaluating Sources

Anyone can put a page on the Internet. Even books and journals can be inaccurate, biased or simply outdated. Here are some ways to be sure the sources you use are appropriate for your research.

Who wrote this? Does the author have the expertise to write on this topic?

- Use the library catalog or a journal database to see if the author has written any other books or articles on the topic.
- If you are using a Web source, look for author information at the bottom of the page or via an “About the Author” type link. Books and some journal articles usually have a bit about the author somewhere.
- Find an online resumé or page about the author's credentials.

Is the information in this source up-to-date?

The accuracy of your source may be affected by the date it was published. Some ideas once believed to be true were later disproved by new discoveries. Fields such as medicine or law might require more time-sensitive information than fields like philosophy or history.

- Find the last updated date in the header or footer of a website. Print items often have a publication date on the inside cover or title page.
- If the author uses facts or statistics from another source, make sure they are properly cited with the date.
- Keep in mind that books take time to be published – so a book published this month might have been written one or two years ago! Journal articles often are best for the most up-to-date scholarly information on a topic.

Is the information in this source biased?

Publishers may have their own agendas when they choose to publish books and magazines. For example, they may hire authors whose writing reflects the values of their publishing company. Information on a web site may reflect the opinions of the organization or individual posting the site. Your task is to identify the publisher of the source, and determine whether the publisher's policies or bias influence the information. To help you decide, consider the following:

- When using a print magazine or journal, see if that periodical has a mission statement on the masthead or inside cover.
- When using a Web source, look for a logo or link back to the home page indicating the organization or author.
- Do a quick Internet search for information about the publisher or author.
- A biased resource is not necessarily a bad resource – you just need to be aware of the bias and be sure that you also use resources that are neutral or on the other side of the issue.

Is this source appropriate for your research?

You and your instructor are the best people to determine if a source is appropriate for your research. Remember that all sources you use should contain well-supported arguments and valid research. Since it is easy to falsify information on the Web, you should look closely at the sources you select online.

- Check how statistics and facts were collected and to whom they are attributed. All should be referenced with a source. If they aren't, how do you know they are true?
- Determine whether the source is an opinion piece.
- Judge whether the source is popular or scholarly. Journal databases make this easy with a checkbox to limit your search to scholarly journals. Make sure you are using the appropriate type of source for your assignment.
- Bibliographies highlight the sources that influenced the author's work. Use the bibliography at the end of your source to find other related works.
- Consider all the information you have gathered about the author, publisher, and date and determine whether the source is appropriate for your information needs.
- If all else fails, ask a librarian – they are there to help you!