



Evaluating Sources

The world is replete with information today. Researching is easier than ever, but it can sometimes be difficult to discern which information is *good* information. With so much data to process, it is important to know how to effectively navigate this information-rich world to find accurate and credible sources. Whether researching for a class, a work assignment, or even just to be a more informed citizen, it is important to evaluate sources to ensure that you are supporting your ideas with strong and reliable evidence. Use the following tips to help you as you evaluate your sources:

- **Use peer-reviewed journal articles.**

One of the easiest ways to ensure that your sources are credible is to use scholarly journal articles that have undergone the peer-review process. Many academic journals employ a peer-review process when deciding what sources to accept for publication. This process often involves having a board of the author's peers/other qualified scholars in the field read and review the source. This board may accept or reject the article for publication and can also make recommendations for the author to revise any rejected article before resubmitting for review. Articles that have undergone this review process and been accepted for publication and published should reflect the academic standards of the scholarly journal publishing them, so they are usually reliable sources for credible information. However, being peer-reviewed does not necessarily mean an article is always a good source; you still want to look at these articles critically to ensure that they are relevant, unbiased, and up to date. The following tips can help as you critically examine and evaluate these peer-reviewed sources as well as other sources.

- **Ensure that your source is current.**

If the source was published recently, the information within the source will be more likely to be up-to-date and relevant to your current research. A good rule of thumb for source currency is to choose sources that were published within the last five years. You should also look at the sources the article uses to see how recent those sources may be.

- **Look at the author of the source.**

If a source lacks an author, that can indicate a lack of credibility in itself. If an author or authors are listed, you should take the time to research the author(s) to find out more about them. If a source's author is appropriately credentialed, there is a better chance that the information they have written is credible. Use the following questions to take a critical look at the author of your sources:

- What credentials (education, degrees, achievements) does the author have?
- Where does the author study, work, or write? Is the author affiliated with any credible institutions or organizations?
- Is the author qualified to write on the subject? For instance, if the author has a degree in English, are they qualified to write an article about mathematics?
- Does the author use credible sources as evidence to support their ideas?

- **Use sources that are relevant to your project.**

Even if a source is credible, if it is not relevant to the project at hand, it will likely not support your ideas. When evaluating a source for relevance, you should first ensure that you have chosen a source that relates to your topic or some point you are making in your writing. Think about the level of the information that the source presents, making sure it is not too simple or elementary or too complex or difficult to understand. You should also look at whether the source presents anything original. If the only useful information you find in a source comes from other outside sources, you may want to use the original sources instead to avoid misrepresenting the meaning of the original source.

- **Make sure that sources are objective and not overly biased.**

No source is completely objective because all authors are human and present their own opinions and points of view. Even so, credible sources should avoid overt bias and strive for as much objectivity as possible. If a source seems to have a purpose that lends itself to bias (e.g., trying to entertain, promote, or sell), then the source may not be objective enough, and the agenda of the author could bias your writing and make you sound less credible.

- **Look at the source's sources.**

Any reputable source should provide some form of a reference list (a bibliography, resource list, works cited list, source list, etc.) to show what outside sources the article used for evidence and support. If you cannot find evidence of your source's research, that is a good indication that the source is not reputable. If there is a list of sources cited within the source, then as mentioned above, this list can evidence the source's credibility. Take a strong, critical look at this list of sources to ensure that the author has used relevant, timely, credible sources to support their ideas and research.

- **Evaluate the evidence of proofreading in the source.**

If a source is full of errors in the writing and/or the citation of sources, that can indicate that the source is not credible. Most peer-reviewed or formally published sources should lack these errors as they have likely undergone an editing and review process before publication. For online sources or other sources that are not published traditionally, looking at editing can be a good way to determine whether the source is reliable or credible. If the author took the time to edit their work and cite their sources correctly, there is a higher likelihood of credibility as the author likely takes pride in their work.