2.3: Evaluating Sources

Now that you have found your sources, you must evaluate them. Evaluating sources becomes a major component of researching because the materials chosen will reflect upon your reputation. Aside from being able to find informative sources, a good researcher is also able to quickly assess the credibility of information. Through practice, this skill will come.

When setting out to write a research paper, there is a vast pool of information available, including books, newspapers, periodicals, reference works, and government documents. Included in this can be your own empirical data, obtained in interviews and surveys, but you will probably not need to use it all. As important as it is to be able to find sources specific to your topic, it is equally vital to be able to correctly assess each source's credibility—that is, how trustworthy, accurate, and verifiable the sources are. Due to the vast amount of information available on the Internet, it presents an especially interesting challenge in determining the credibility of sources. However, even when evaluating print sources, the same criticism should be maintained.

You must also be aware of the author’s possible bias. Even the most credible sources may exhibit forms of bias, as most authors’ past experiences will come into play. Bias is most likely to occur in controversial topics but is still likely to be present whenever an opinion is voiced. The author’s beliefs and experiences can thus affect the objectivity of the text. Another case may be when the author or publisher has ties to a special interest group that may allow him or her to see only one side of the issue. Lastly, make sure to evaluate how fairly the author treats the opposing viewpoints. Complete objectivity is very difficult to attain in writing, but try to find sources that are not incredibly subjective. Nonetheless, the most important thing is simply to be aware of possible biases so that you are not misled.

Here are four approaches to assessing the credibility of the sources you find.
Evaluating Print Sources

The fact that it’s in print doesn’t automatically make it a reliable source. When evaluating print sources ask yourself these questions:

Book

• **How old is it?** Research projects will have different requirements as to how old your sources can be. For example, when dealing with contemporary issues or a current controversy, using outdated sources will likely provide inaccurate information. For example, a book on euthanasia published in 1978 probably isn’t the best choice. While the book may contain useful information for other projects, it does not make sense to use it when there are more current materials available.

• **Who is the publisher?** Books published by a university press undergo significant editing and review to increase their validity and accuracy. When assessing a book published by a commercial publisher, be aware of vanity presses (companies that authors pay to publish their works, rather than vice versa). Also be cautious about using books labeled as “self-published” or books that are published by specific organizations (such as a corporation or a nonprofit group).

• **Is the author objective?** Check biographical information included in the book, as well as other sources, to gather information about the author’s background as a way of determining his or her stance on a particular issue. In addition, find out about his or her previous works, past professional experience, affiliations with groups or movements, current employment, and degrees or other credentials.

Periodical

• **Is it a scholarly journal or a magazine?** Scholarly journals are almost always characterized by no advertisements, longer articles, and the requirement that authors cite the sources they use in writing their articles. Articles submitted to scholarly journals undergo substantial scrutiny by other professionals as a way to increase the clarity and accuracy of the information contained in them. Most scholarly journals are not sold on newsstands, but rather are circulated primarily among the academic community. In contrast, magazines are available for purchase; they tend to contain shorter articles, generally don’t require writers to cite their sources, and contain advertising. Therefore, while magazines may contain relevant information, the content may not always be entirely accurate.

• **How old is it?** As noted above, dated material can sometimes be inaccurate. Always ask your instructor if you’re uncertain about how old is too old.

• **Newspaper article: What do you know about the paper that publishes it?** Some newspapers have a discernible political slant, which can often be found by skimming through the headlines or by seeing how others regard the newspaper. For example, The Los Angeles Times is considered a more progressive news source, while its neighbor, The Orange County Register, is considered to have a libertarian slant.

Evaluating Web Sources

For most academic research, teachers will require that students use a mix of popular and scholarly sources. For this there are a number of academic databases that will always provide credible sources. These sites generally require some form of a subscription in order to access them; however, many colleges provide complimentary access to students. Once logged into the site, users are able to search and sort the articles by criterion such as date, subject, author, and more importantly, whether or not they have been peer reviewed and are scholarly. Examples of these sites include, but
are not limited to: Academic Search Premier, JSTOR, and ProQuest. Links to these “gated websites” can generally be found on your school’s web page. Nevertheless, always ask what databases are available to you as a student.

While the rest of the Internet has a wide range of easily accessible and useful information, discretion must be maintained. Because anyone can put information on the Internet, make it your first priority to know who is behind the sites you find. Individuals? Nonprofit groups? Corporations? Academics? Advocacy groups? Federal, state, or local government? Small businesses or single vendors? Depending on your topic, you may want to avoid .com web sites; for many, their primary purpose is commerce, and that can significantly affect what they publish. Of course, other websites can also have agendas including .org sites. This can lead to false or misleading information. Therefore, it is best to consult a number of sources so that those with agendas will stand out.

A note about Wikipedia: Wikipedia is often the first resource both students and the general public look for information about any given topic, and it’s a great place to start. In scholastic research, however, Wikipedia is generally not qualified as a reliable source because of the interactive nature of the site, among other reasons. Good researchers follow the links that Wikipedia articles provide and evaluate those leads as they would any source selected for academic and scholastic work.

Ask yourself:

- **By whom was the website created?** Be cautious if there is no author. Try looking for “about this site” or check the homepage. Does the website discuss the qualifications of the author(s)? Does it give contact information such as an email address or telephone number?

- **By whom is the website sponsored?** Determine whether the website is sponsored by a special interest group. By learning about the affiliated groups, much can be ascertained about the credibility of the author and web site. Also look at the domain name. This will tell you by whom the site is sponsored. For example: educational (.edu), commercial (.com), nonprofit (.org), military (.mil), or network (.net).

- **Is the website relevant?** Decide whether the information is something that can actually be used in the paper or, at the very least, gives a helpful background. If what is found cannot be used, move on to something else.

- **Does the website contain any errors?** Can the definitions, figures, dates, and other facts presented on the website be verified in other sources? Look for grammar, spelling, punctuation, and content errors. If there appears to be more than one or two content errors, move on.

- **Is the website relatively unbiased?** As it is noted above, carefully examining the source behind the website can lead to clues as to what kind of bias and agenda the site may contain. Once the source has been deemed valid, continue to remain alert, especially if the topic is controversial. Look for websites that discuss multiple points of view. Take note of the language used, and avoid sites that seem to exhibit characteristics of bias and/or inaccurate information.

- **Are there advertisements on the Web page?** Do these particular advertisements reflect a possible bias toward the subject matter?

- **What appears to be the website’s purpose?** Think about why the site was created. Is its purpose to inform, persuade, or sell a product to the reader? For whom was the site created? Who is the intended audience? If you are not included in the intended audience, carefully consider whether or not the information is relevant to your research.

- **Is the website comprehensive?** A valuable website will cover a topic in-depth and lead to additional sources.

- **Does the website provide references?** Determine whether the references themselves are authoritative.

- **How old is the website?** A website that has remained on the Internet a long time may be better trusted than one that was added a month ago. Make sure that the information is not outdated. When was the site last updated? Credible websites will garner ongoing attention by their creators to make sure that the content is as up-to-date as
possible.

- **Has the website received any awards?** Websites that have received awards may have better reputations.

- **Is the website user-friendly?** Does the website download quickly? Can you read all the text? Does any text appear too small, in strange characters, or in a font that is illegible? How easy is it to navigate through the website? Is the content accessible? The information presented should be clear, precise, and easy to understand. Avoid using sites that make use of overly scientific and/or technological terms that are difficult to understand. If it cannot be clearly understood, it may lead to misinterpretation and thus incorrect information in your work.