

Considering Your Sources with a Critical Eye

The sources you use to support what you say in your papers and presentations reflect the quality and substance of your work. When selecting sources, choose ones worthy of your paper. This requires that you to find and critically read many sources. By reading through many materials on your subject, you will get a good understanding of the subject, feel less confused about what you want to write and become a better judge of what are the best sources for your paper.

Relevance + Credibility + Timeliness + Dependability + Point of view = A Good Source.

- **Relevance:** How well does the source fit your information need?

Consider the intended audience of the source and decide if it is appropriate for college level research. Consider how well it relates to what you are studying and writing about?

- **Credibility:** How trustworthy is the source? Is the author (or publishing body) qualified to write on the subject? How biased is the point of view?

Good authors include their credentials. If they don't, try doing a search on their name to find out more about them. Credible authors also back up what they say with citations. Journalists usually describe their sources in the body of the article while scholars usually use a works cited list like you do in your work.

Quality sources are usually edited by someone other than the author. Editors check the work for clear writing and accurate sources. Scholarly sources are also reviewed and edited by panels of experts in the peer review of articles.

Publishers decide what information will be published and take responsibility for what they publish. By knowing the publisher's reputation you can better evaluate the source. Authors may self-publish, and then it is likely that only the author judged the value of the material. Sometimes publishers have a point of view; for example an article by a racist organization can be trusted to have a racist point of view. Try searching on the web for publishers you don't recognize to investigate their reputation. For Web sources look for the **About** page of the Website.

Learn about the topic. The more you know about the topic and what others are writing about it the better you will be able to judge its credibility.

- **Timeliness:** Is the source current enough?

The date of a source for a history paper may be less important than for a nursing paper or a computer technology paper. A source about terrorism from 1998 is going to be missing important points when compared to a source produced last month.

- **Dependability:** Will the source be there when others follow up on your research?

Many Web sources are here today and gone tomorrow. In addition Web sources are meant to be easily modified. Will the source read the same or be in the same place when your instructor follows up on your research?

Is the source well indexed in databases, print indexes or catalogs? When sources are well indexed, you and others can find the source again with just a portion of the citation information, such as title or author.

- **Point of View:** What is the point of view of the source?

If the source is subjective, promoting one agenda or opinion over others, you need to balance it with other sources. Advertisements that surround the article may give you a clue to the point of view. See if the information presented is being used to sell a product. To check if the source is a hoax or scam, try doing an Internet search by putting the title,

publisher, author or topic phrase in quotes and add the words *hoax*, "*urban myth*", *scam* or *review* and see what other sources on the web say about the source you are checking out.

Critical Evaluation of Sources Check List

Relevance + Credibility + Timeliness + Dependability + Point of view = A Good Source.

When considering any source (e.g., video, book, article or website) consider this check list:

Relevance

Favors use of source

- Relates to subject and topic
- College level information

Opposes use of source

- Information too specialized or over my head
- Written for school kids
- Information is too brief or vague

Credibility

Favors use of source

- Author information available
- Author is qualified
- Citations are provided
- It is professionally edited
- It is peer reviewed
- Publisher/site owner has good reputation
- Publisher specializes in the subject
- It is a well respected journal or Web source

Opposes use of source

- Author information unavailable
- Author is unqualified
- Author does not back up what is said
- Author has a financial or political stake in the subject
- Not professionally edited
- Cannot check publisher reputation
- It is self-published
- It is an entertainment article
- It is a Hoax or urban myth
- No contact information for author or responsible parties

Timeliness

Favors use of source

- Information is current for my topic
- I can supplement with current information

Opposes use of source

- Information is out of date
- No date of creation or update is given

Dependability

Favors use of source

- It is in print
- It is an online source that is also print
- A Web source that archives information
- The source is cataloged or indexed in a database

Opposes use of source

- It is a Web source that might change
- I can't trust that I can return to the information
- I have to Google and pray to find it again

Point of View

Favors use of source

- The information is presented objectively
- Provides an important side of the subject

Opposes use of source

- Writing is blatantly biased
- Used to sell a product
- Has a blatant political bias

After considering the source critically I have decided to:

- Use the source
- Use the source, but provide other sides of the subject

- Use the source, but supplement with more current information
- Use the source, but I need to qualify or justify its use in the text of my paper
- Not use the source