Evaluating Information

This guide demonstrates how to assess information sources to determine their quality and usefulness to your research projects.

Currency

Currency refers to the publication date and timeliness of information. Topics often evolve over time so it is necessary to verify that information has not become outdated.

Ask yourself:

- Is currency important for my topic?
  
  *Many topics require the most recent information available to discuss the issues properly. Other topics with a historical focus may not depend on currency.*

- Is there a more recent version or edition of the information?
  
  *Check to see if information has been revised, refuted, or confirmed in more recent publications.*

Relevance

Relevance refers to how well the information addresses your topic and how much coverage is provided. Each research topic is unique and you must determine which sources will best meet your needs.

Ask yourself:

- What is the depth of the information?
  
  *Sources vary widely. Some provide brief overviews of a topic, some are more comprehensive, and some focus on details or small components of a subject.*

- Who is the intended audience?
  
  *Different sources are written for different audiences. You may encounter information on your topic aimed at children. You may also find information on your topic aimed at professionals and experts. Information may also exist to entertain a broader audience.*

- Have you consulted multiple sources before deciding on this source?
  
  *Because most topics are covered by a wide range of sources, you may find that another source is significantly more relevant to your research.*

Accuracy

Accuracy refers to the legitimacy and credibility of the information. It also refers to how widely the information is accepted amongst subject experts. Because of the sheer amount of information available on most topics, you are likely to encounter both respectable and questionable sources.

Ask yourself:

- Has the information been supported by other reputable sources?
  
  *Verify that any conclusions agree with the current research found in other publications. Information that largely disagrees with other sources requires additional scrutiny.*
Accuracy continued…

- Does the information include citations and credit reliable sources?

  *Citations and references help establish credibility. They tell the reader that the information is based on evidence and that the authors are familiar with the research in their field.*

- Was the information reviewed or verified by experts?

  *Scholarly research often undergoes a peer-review process. Most news sources rely on fact checking. Book sources usually employ editors familiar with the subject to the review content. These steps help to increase accuracy.*

Authority

Authority refers to the expertise of the authors and those responsible for the information. Since anyone can produce information - especially online - it is essential to verify the credentials and level of experience behind your chosen sources.

Ask yourself:

- Can you tell who produced the information?

  *Look for names of authors or editors identified in the source. If there is no named author or editor, it could be that an organization (like a government agency) is responsible for the content. If there is no apparent author or organization noted, you should further critically examine the information.*

- Does the author/organization list their credentials on the subject?

  *Most information sources will briefly identify credentials like educational background, academic or research affiliations, past publications, and field experience. Also, confirm that the authors’ credentials are applicable to the subject.*

Purpose

Purpose refers to the intent of the information and the objectivity of the authors. Information exists for a variety of reasons: to inform, to persuade, to analyze, to comment, to entertain, etc.

Ask yourself:

- Why was the information created?

  *In research projects, it is important to use sources presented ethically, objectively, and academically. Look for advertising or product placement that is not clearly separate from the rest of the information.*

- Can you determine possible bias or conflict of interest?

  *While biased information may not be invalid, you must carefully examine it. Facts could be distorted, misrepresented, or left out. Ensure that there is little to no interjection of opinion. Any political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal bias can alter the information presentation. Confirm that their sources are represented accurately and are also balanced and unbiased.*