

Information Literacy Part Three: Evaluating Information Critically

The ability to evaluate critically *all* sources of information—but particularly those found on the World Wide Web—is an essential skill that all information-literate individuals must learn to develop. Without this ability your research is—at best—extremely suspect, and at worst, unreliable and likely useless.

Learn to apply the following criteria to *all* information found during your research, but especially to Web resources and pages you intend to use in scholarly assignments.

A. Five Criteria for Evaluating Information Sources

1) Authority:

- Who created the information? Check credentials where possible as well as URLs and domains of Web sources.
- Distinguish between the author of the information and the editor or Webmaster. Is contact information available?
- Are the qualifications of the creators or sponsors appropriate for the information and for your project?
- Where is the information published? University press? Web only?

2) Accuracy:

- Can the facts be checked against other sources?
- Are there citations or links available to verify the legitimacy of the information or that lead to related information in another source or Web page?
- Are graphs and charts clearly labeled, if present?
- Is the source free from grammatical and spelling errors?

3) Objectivity:

- How is the information presented? Is it meant to convey information or to persuade? Is the tone neutral or biased?
- What assumptions does the author make? Does he agree or disagree with others on the subject?
- Ask yourself why the information was written and for whom?
- Is the information source free from advertising, or are ads clearly distinguished from the content?

4) Currency:

- Can you determine when the information was created/published?
- Is this the most current edition of the information source? For Web pages: are any revisions of information content noted or dated?
- Does the timeframe of the information match the information you are seeking?
- Are Web links kept updated? Are there dead links?

5) Coverage:

- How in-depth is the information?
- Is the information complete?
- Is the information “free” or is a fee requested?
- Are there print equivalents to some or all of the Web content?

Other Criteria to Consider When Evaluating Information Sources:

6) Quantity

- Do you have sufficient information to support your argument? To include a variety of viewpoints and materials?

7) Variety

- Include different types of resources, such as:
 - Primary sources that give contemporary accounts of events (e.g., newspaper accounts, speeches, letters, etc.)
 - Secondary sources that analyze primary sources (e.g., books, articles, editorials, reviews, scientific studies, etc.)

For more help in learning how to evaluate Web information, visit the following link:
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>

B. Quality vs. Quantity of Sources

As you evaluate critically the information you have acquired, you should also consider the issue of quality vs. quantity.

Quantity

Your instructor may specify that a certain number of outside sources are required to satisfy the assignment, or you may need to decide on your own how many outside sources to provide.

Determining the amount of outside research to do on your own can be difficult: the balance of the words, thoughts, and ideas in any assignment should be your own, but one point of research is to prove that you can identify, locate, use, and cite outside resources appropriately.

Also, assignments differ in scope: one five-page paper topic might only require one or two outside sources to make an argument; another five-page paper topic might require five or even more.

Very often, your assignment will help determine the amount of research you need to find and use. Understand the assignment carefully, and ask your instructor questions, if necessary. Good research is not about finding a lot of sources but finding the right number of sources and using them appropriately.

Quality

Recognizing the quality of your sources has already been mentioned in this section, but it bears repeating that good research involves finding the best and most appropriate sources for the topic.

Identifying the best resources can be tricky, especially if your topic is controversial. The Internet is a democratic venue where the full range of opinion can be found, but bookstores and libraries also contain material on a wide variety of thoughts and ideas. For this reason it is just as important to evaluate library material as it is to evaluate Web-based information! Carefully check the credentials of the authors whose sources you select.

It may be difficult to find and use material on a perspective or belief that differs from your own. Remember that ideas are usually not as simple as “right” or “wrong.” You may need to use different keywords or sources to find what you’re looking for. Ask your instructor or a librarian if you are having difficulty finding appropriate materials.

Although you will likely identify and find many sources over the course of your research, you may only end up using four or five of the best and most authoritative sources. Be careful to cite all of your sources carefully, especially if an idea is generated by a source

you don't actually quote. Err on the side of caution and cite all sources that play a role in the creation of your paper, project, or presentation.

Remember: you are not required to find everything ever thought or written on your topic, only the most appropriate amount of the best sources. This requires striking a balance between quality and quantity. You demonstrate finding this balance by the sources you end up using. Give yourself enough time to identify and choose sources carefully.