Evaluating Information Sources

When evaluating whether a source is appropriate for your research, it’s helpful to think as fact-checkers do. Fact checkers take bearings and read laterally before re-engaging with a source and making a judgement about it. Taking bearings refers to making a plan for how you will investigate your source. Lateral reading is the act of using third-party sources to evaluate credibility (right-clicking and opening tabs across the horizontal axis). Through lateral reading, you can verify authority, purpose, and accuracy.

You may have to dig deep to learn about the expertise, or authority, behind a source. Websites and articles may be written by one person and funded by another, so you must consider everyone involved in the source’s creation.

- Is the author a researcher, professional, or reporter?
  - Researchers are not always more knowledgeable than professionals, and reporters may gain expertise with time spent covering a topic.
- Who is the creator or organization behind the source? What biases might they have?
- Who is the publishing outlet? What affiliates and funding sources? What interests do they have?
  - Remember, many sources are designed, created, and financed by groups to promote their own interests.

It’s also important to consider the aim or purpose of an author or publisher in producing a source. Prestige, reputation, and revenue are a few incentives we must consider.

- What is the author/publisher attempting to accomplish?
- What incentives do they have to produce correct information?
- In general, choose a publication that has incentive to get things right, as shown by authorial intent, business model, reputational incentives, and history of accuracy.
- Watch out for front groups who claim to represent one position while really serving the interests of a hidden sponsor. Some front groups mask themselves as grassroots (local, people-powered) groups to boost credibility.
  - E.g. the Center for Consumer Freedom claims to defend the rights of consumers to eat, drink, and smoke as they please. In reality, CCF is a front group funded by the tobacco, restaurant, and alcoholic beverage industries.

It is no longer effective to evaluate a source’s accuracy based on a professional or correct appearance. Untrustworthy sites, articles, and front groups can have appropriate URLs, nice-looking logos, and text free of spelling errors, so you have to instead look at history of accuracy.

- Is the source’s information fact-checked or reviewed by others?
- Does the source have processes for verifying facts? Do they issue corrections when they get facts wrong?
- Always check a news source’s record of accuracy independent of their narratives and biases.
- Peer-reviewed publications with a large following of experts have a greater chance of catching mistakes.

Other tips:
- Nonprofit status does not mean that organization is entirely altruistic.
- When scanning search results, remember that the top results are not always the most authoritative.
- Be wary of new studies. They are often a collection of data points rather than the broad consensus of experts.
For each of your information sources, consider the following questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is the information <strong>relevant</strong> to your work?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the source add to your project? Does the source support, oppose, or inform a main point in your research?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What questions will the source help you answer? What claims will the source help you establish?

How can you use this source in your paper? Background information? Supporting evidence? Opposing viewpoint?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is the information <strong>credible</strong>?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How reliable is the author/creator/organization? How reliable is the source material?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What are the author/creator/organization’s credentials?

What evidence does the author/creator/organization use to support their claims? Can you verify this information in another source?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Does the source help you <strong>learn</strong> something new?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does the source change the way you look at the issue or bring in a new perspective?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strong no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What new ideas do you have? What do you still want to find out?