

10 Questions for Evaluating Information Sources

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Here are 10 questions to help you determine whether an information source is credible and appropriate to use. You don't have to answer them in exactly the order presented here, and they might not all apply in every case, but it's important to try to answer as many as you can. If you don't evaluate the sources you find, you might make a decision based on poor information and that could lead to bad results, not only on university assignments but also in life. Sometimes it won't matter that much, but sometimes it will, so it's best to make a habit of asking these questions.

It doesn't usually take very long to answer the first four questions, so they're a good place to start. The answers to these four questions can give you a very good idea of whether the source will be worthwhile or not, but you won't know for sure until you take a closer look and engage with the source's content. The last six questions will help with that.

INITIAL APPRAISAL

1. Is this source relevant to my information need?

The first question to ask yourself is whether the source is going to be useful to you or not. Will it help you achieve your purpose? How will you use it? Will you use it to learn background information about a topic, or as evidence to support a larger argument, or in some other way?

The source might be useful in some contexts but not in others. If it doesn't meet your current information need, then skip it and move on to another source that does.

Keep in mind that you'll probably need to consult lots of different sources to answer a complex research question, and it might take some digging to find the answers you need.

2. Who wrote (or created) this source?

What is the author's background? Have they received formal education that's relevant to what they're writing about? Do they teach this subject professionally? Do they have a lot of relevant work/life experience in this area? Has the author published on this subject before? Are they considered an expert?

If the author has credentials and experience that makes them an expert—and especially if they are highly regarded within their field—then we can have more confidence in the information they present. Keep in mind, though, that even experts make mistakes

sometimes, so we shouldn't just accept everything an expert says without thinking critically about it. But, certainly, we should pay more attention to experts than non-experts.

If the author isn't considered an expert on the topic, that doesn't automatically mean the source is unreliable though. It is possible for non-experts to gather really good material (produced by multiple experts) and present it in a really helpful and compelling way. That is, after all, what you're aiming to do when you research a new topic and write an essay for a course. But if the author isn't an expert, then they'd better be citing experts and using really good evidence that stands up to scrutiny.

Learning about the background and reputation of an author/creator is one of the most important things you can do in helping you determine the reliability of a source.

3. Who published this information and what kind of reputation do they have?

Knowing who the publisher of source is can tell you something about the nature and quality of that source. For example, Scholastic is well-known for publishing good-quality fiction and non-fiction books for children and young adults, so if you see a book published by Scholastic you know it's probably well-written and geared towards a younger audience. If the book is printed by a university press (many publishers refer to themselves as presses) then you know it was probably written by a professional academic, edited and checked for accuracy, and intended for a university audience. Most large universities publish books and journals; for example, there's University of Toronto Press, Oxford University Press, Stanford University Press, and many more. Books and journals published by university presses are good sources to use for university research assignments. Along with university presses, Sage, Palgrave, Brill, Wiley, and Springer are among the most respected publishers of academic books and journals. Some publishers specialize in a particular subject area; Jossey-Bass, for example, specializes in academic books about teaching/education and has a great reputation. If you don't know the reputation of a particular publisher, a quick Google search can help with that. Be sure to get more than one opinion when checking on a publishers' reputation, though, because some opinions are based on personal feelings and nothing else—someone might, for example, say a publisher is awful because they published something that was critical, but accurate, about them or a friend of theirs, or someone might say a publisher is wonderful simply because they printed something favourable about them or that agrees with their worldview.

It's also good to know if a publisher has a particular bias. Publishers have biases just like people do, because publishing companies are, after all, made up of people. The *New York Times* has a reputation for having a liberal bias, while the *Wall Street Journal* has a reputation for having a conservative bias. This doesn't mean everything they print will be biased, and it doesn't mean the information they share is inaccurate. In fact, both of these publications have earned good reputations because of their high journalistic standards. A good journalist, and a good academic, will try not to let their personal biases result in an inaccurate and unfair treatment of a subject. It's important to be aware of other people's biases (and our own) so we can check to see whether the bias

has unfairly affected their (and our) judgement and conclusions. If you detect that a source is heavily biased, then you should reject it.

Self-publishing is becoming increasingly popular. Self-published works shouldn't be automatically seen as poor quality or good quality. Their content needs to be examined to determine that. It's much more common, though, for fiction or other creative works to be self-published than for works of a scholarly nature to be published this way. When a publisher chooses to publish a work (that they didn't write themselves), they're effectively saying "we looked at this and we think it's good too, or at least we think people will want to buy copies of it." Publishers with a good reputation are going to be careful about not printing anything that will hurt their reputations, so when you see a book published by a university or company with a good reputation then you can have much more confidence that the book is good quality.

4. When was this information published? Is it current or out of date?

It's important to consider the publication date when determining whether a source will be useful to you or not. Was the source published so long ago that the information is now out of date?

Sometimes you hear people say you shouldn't use sources from more than 5 or 10 or X number of years ago. Well, there's no hard-and-fast rule about how new a source should be in order for it to be useful. It depends on the topic you're studying, on the nature of your information need, and on the qualities of the source you're considering. For example, if you need to know how to protect a wireless network against cyberattacks then it's very important to find a recent source. If you're studying the history of the personal computer industry, and you find a book that covers this in great detail and was written by an expert, then it's okay if the book was published several years ago.

You should always try to include at least some newer sources (within the past 5 years) in any university essay/project you're doing, as this shows you have considered and incorporated the latest research, but for most topics it's okay to use some really good sources that are 5-10 or more years old.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

5. What type of source is this? Who is the intended audience?

When evaluating a source, it's important to know what type of source it is, so you can judge it appropriately and decide whether to use it and how to use it. For example, popular novels are good sources if you want to be entertained, and news sources are good if you need to know about recent events, but these types of sources generally aren't appropriate for academic essays (unless you're writing an essay about a novel or analyzing the news). Some sources are intended for children, while others are meant for teens, while others are written for adults. Some are intended for general audiences while

others are written for experts. Determining the age level and knowledge level the source was intended for will help you decide whether the source is right for you or not. Just keep in mind that one type of source may be very appropriate to use for some information needs but not for others. You'll be expected to use mainly (or entirely) academic sources for most university assignments.

It's also important that you know the difference between primary and secondary sources. Primary sources were created at the time and place under investigation and provide direct knowledge of something that happened. A soldier's letters from World War II are an example of a primary source. Other examples include diaries, legal documents, news reports, field notes, and medical records. Secondary sources synthesize, interpret, explain, and draw conclusions from information/evidence derived from primary sources and other secondary sources. An historian's book about World War II, for example, is a secondary source. It might contain copies of some primary sources, but the book as a whole is a secondary source.

Depending on context, a source can be either a primary or secondary source. For example, if you want background information about Martin Luther King, Jr. then a Wikipedia entry is definitely a secondary source, but if you're studying how people use Wikipedia to share information, then that same article could be used as a primary source. Just to make things confusing, sometimes people call certain types of secondary sources (specifically, encyclopedias and other types of background sources) tertiary sources. The main thing is to know the difference between primary and secondary sources, how they're used, and how a primary source might be a valid source to use in one context but not in another. If your purpose is to treat a patient with lung cancer then it wouldn't be appropriate to use a medical text from the 1800s, but if your purpose is to understand how lung cancer was treated in the 1800s then this would be an excellent primary source to use.

6. What is the author's purpose?

Is the author trying to convince their readers of something? Are they presenting new information and/or arguments, or are they trying to back up/support someone else's argument? It's important to know the author's purpose and to evaluate their work based on that. For example, if an author's purpose is to explain another person's argument then we shouldn't criticize them for failing to present a brand new and convincing argument of their own.

You should be extra cautious about accepting information when the author's purpose is to get you to buy something. It's very common in these cases for authors to leave out negative information that might dissuade someone from making a purchase, and/or to make certain claims that are misleading or completely untrue. An evaluation from an independent expert whose purpose is to inform, would be much more reliable.

7. Does the author use evidence to support their claims? Is their evidence convincing?

Does the author support their argument(s) with facts and evidence, or just opinion? Facts can be checked/verified, while opinions can't be. For example, if I said that Wayne Gretzky scored 894 regular season goals in his NHL career this is something you can check. If I said that Wayne Gretzky is the best hockey player ever, that's my opinion and other hockey fans may have different opinions. To persuade you that my opinion is right, I would need to present an argument. A good argument will include relevant facts and strong evidence. For example, I could say Wayne Gretzky is the best hockey player because he scored more goals than anyone else and played on four Stanley Cup winning teams. While it is a fact that he scored the most goals and played on four Stanley Cup winning teams, you could argue that there are factors more important than goals and Stanley Cup victories for determining greatness. You could argue that if he hadn't played on good teams for so long he wouldn't have scored so many goals or won that many Cups.

Here's another example: if I wanted to determine if one type of drug is more effective than another type of drug, I could set up some experiments to test their effectiveness. If you then came across my research and wanted to know how valid it was, you would need to look at how I conducted my experiments. Did I properly apply the scientific method, or did I set up my experiment in such a way that one drug had an unfair advantage over the other drug?

If someone makes the claim that 80 percent of young people prefer Classical music to Pop music, you should be asking how they define "young people," how many people they surveyed, where and how they found their respondents, and exactly what question they asked. The way in which the survey was conducted can make a huge difference. Let's say, for example, they only asked 5 people, don't know the exact ages but thought they "looked young," found all their respondents at a Classical music concert, and the question they asked was "you like Classical music more than Pop music, right?"

The initial appraisal questions (1-4) listed above are important but, ultimately, the most important question is: what does the author actually say and do they present a well-reasoned argument that is supported by strong evidence? You'll need to read the source carefully to answer this question.

8. What sources are cited?

It's acceptable for some types of sources not to cite other sources; for example, a story or play, a letter, a movie review, a short opinion piece. Good academic sources will always cite other sources, and the sources they cite will also be good academic sources (unless they're citing a poor source for the purpose of refuting it).

9. How do the ideas/arguments/evidence in this source compare with those of other sources?

Comparing one source with other sources is one of the best ways to help you evaluate the quality/credibility of a source. You should be skeptical of sources that make claims or provide data that are wildly different from most other sources. However, you shouldn't automatically dismiss a source just because it's different. Although unlikely, it's possible the author saw something that no one else saw. Maybe everyone kept repeating the same mistake until that one person came along and fixed it. Every scientific advancement in history started out as one person challenging the conventional wisdom.

So, what should you do when you find a source that's significantly different from the majority of other sources? If you think it could be important, then scrutinize it very carefully and see if you can figure out either where it got things right where others got things wrong, or where it slips up where others don't. Maybe it's not a case of them making a clear error; maybe they just have a different interpretation or opinion than others. If that's the case, you'll have to decide for yourself which interpretation is most plausible.

10. What do other people think of this source?

Can you find any sources that comment on this source? What do those sources say? Do they offer praise or criticism, or maybe both? What do you think of the praise and/or criticism? Is it warranted?

Most academic journals include reviews of recently published books. These reviews are usually between 1-4 pages long and written by other scholars in the same field. They can be very helpful in determining the quality and usefulness of a book! You can find book reviews by searching for a book's title in a library database or in Google Scholar.

It is very common for academic books and articles to include commentary about other academic sources. This will include reasons why they agree or disagree with other authors and acknowledgement for contributions that other scholars have made. When an author publishes their research findings they are contributing to a scholarly conversation. If you can't find any commentary/reactions to a particular source, don't take that as a sign that the source isn't worthwhile. There are plenty of possible reasons why a source might not have been commented on yet.

Keep in mind that just because a source doesn't pass one question/test with flying colours, that doesn't necessarily mean it's worthless. It's possible, for example, for a self-published book to be more accurate than a book on the same subject from a well-known publisher. Reserve judgement until you've asked enough questions and spent enough time with a source to know it more fully. And, finally, remember that if you get stuck answering one or more of these questions, you can reach out to a librarian, a teacher, or a friend for help. You don't have to do it all alone.