

How to Evaluate the Information You Find



Gardner-Harvey Library

Introduction

Every source of information you find (books, articles, Internet sites, etc.) can and should be evaluated before you use it. You need to make sure that the information you quote in a paper, in a speech, or in everyday discussion is accurate and meaningful. The process of evaluation helps you answer a number of questions about your information source, including:

- Is the source fact or fiction?
- Does the source have a particular perspective, or does it cover all points of view?
- Does the source have the right amount of information that I need?
- Does the source have the right type of information that I need?

Six questions to ask when evaluating a source are listed below:

1. **Who** wrote or created the source?

- Is the author a knowledgeable individual on the subject of the information or not?
- Information created by a knowledgeable individual or expert tends to be more reliable than that created by someone without experience in a given area.

2. **What** audience was the source written for?

- Is it a document written for people new to the topic, or for scholars of its topic? You can often answer this question by looking at the language used by the author(s).
- Depending on the requirements of your assignment, you need to decide whether the information in the source will be easily understood or valuable to those who read your work.
- You should also note whether the source provides enough information to meet your needs (some sources are brief overviews of a subject and others can be quite long and involved).

3. **Where** did you (or can you) find the source?

- The location of the information can (but does not always) affect its value.
- If the information is found in a **scholarly journal** (discussed below) or on an organization's or government's Web site, it tends to be more accurate than if it is found in The National Enquirer or on someone's personal site.

4. **When** was the source written or created?

- Newer information is not always better information, but some topics require more current information than others.
- If you are writing a paper about new treatments for AIDS, you would not want to use a source written in 1989 because there have been so many advances since that time (you might, however, use that source to provide historical examples of treatments).

5. **Why** was the source written?

- Sources of information are created both to provide information and, in many cases, to shape people's opinions about an issue or topic.
- You need to be able to tell whether your source is **biased** (holding to one particular viewpoint) or **objective** (presenting all sides of an issue fairly).

- All sources have a certain amount of bias, so more often than not you are balancing biased sources out with those of opposite bias when you are writing an objective work.

6. **How** can you verify the information contained in the source?

- Information sources may give you some indication of where they obtained their information in a bibliography or list of citations. If you decide to question the facts presented in a source, you could then go to the other cited sources to check their accuracy.
- In cases where a source of information does not refer you elsewhere for verification, you may have to search for additional sources on your own.

Scholarly vs. Popular Periodicals

Periodical articles are a common place to find information on nearly any subject. Periodicals are publications that come out on a regular basis (quarterly, monthly, daily, etc.). They can be broken into three main groups:

- **Newspapers** (report current happenings, opinions, and special interest features)
(Examples: The Middletown Journal, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal)
- **Magazines** (present articles of popular interest on a variety of subjects)
(Examples: Time, Newsweek, Popular Science, Psychology Today)
- **Journals** (offer the results of studies and experiments conducted by scholars)
(Examples: New England Journal of Medicine, RN, Nature, Journal of Leisure Research)

Scholarly articles (also known as journal articles, refereed articles, or research articles) are found in journals. This type of article is greatly respected as a source of information on a topic. Periodical articles from **popular periodicals** (magazines or newspapers) will provide information on a topic but will usually lack the depth or specificity that scholarly journal articles provide. For some assignments, you may be required to find scholarly articles when researching a topic. In other cases, you may wish to find scholarly articles to be sure your information has some authority.

Internet Sources

While the basic points of evaluation are the same for any information source, Internet sources have some additional points to note. While books and articles undergo a sometimes lengthy editorial process that should cut down on inaccuracies (but not necessarily eliminate biases), Internet information can be created and “published” online by anyone in a matter of minutes. This fact should not make us reject any information we find on the Internet, but rather we should be more cautious. Consider these points:

- Pay close attention to the **URL** (site address) of the information you find. Put a critical eye to information placed on a personal Web page.
- Carefully note the bibliography or list of citations that the source includes. The source may include hypertext links to Internet sources that it cites, which makes it easier for you to view them and verify the information in the original source.
- Use multiple sources (both print and electronic) to help you confirm the information you find on the Internet.