

Evaluating Information

In the research process you will encounter many types of resources including books, articles and Web sites. However, not everything you find on your topic will be suitable.

Initial appraisal

Begin evaluating a book or an article by first examining the bibliographic citation. The three main components of the bibliographic citation are: author, title, and publication information. They can help determine the usefulness of the source for your paper. Use the same criteria to evaluate Web sites. Consider the following criteria:

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| Author | What are the author's credentials: institutional affiliation, educational background, past writings, or experience? Is the book, article or Web site written on a topic in the author's area of expertise? |
| Date of publication | When was the source published? The date is often located on the face of the title page below the name of the publisher or on the reverse of the title page. On Web sites, the date of the last revision is usually at the bottom of the page. If it is conference papers or a journal article check for the dates. Are the links up to date? |
| Currency | Is the source current or historical? Your topic determines which of these you should use for your paper. |
| Edition or revision | Is this a first edition? Further editions indicate a source has been revised and updated to reflect changes in knowledge and to include previous omissions. Also, many printings or editions may indicate that the work has become a standard source in the area and is reliable. If you are using a Web site, do the pages indicate revision dates? |
| Publisher | Note the publisher. If the source is published by a university press, it is likely to be scholarly. Although the fact that the publisher is reputable does not necessarily guarantee quality, it does show that the publisher may have high regard for the source being published. |
| Title of journal | Is this a scholarly or a popular journal ? For definition see: http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/units/dafoe/journals.html . This distinction is important because it indicates different levels of complexity in conveying ideas. If you need help in determining the type of journal consult Libraries' staff. |

Content analysis

After the initial appraisal, examine the body of the source. Read the preface to determine the author's intentions. Scan the table of contents and the index to get a broad overview of the material. Note whether bibliographies are included. Read the chapters that specifically address your topic.

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| Scope or content | What is the breadth of the article, book or Web site? Is it a general work that provides an overview of the topic or is it specifically focused on only one aspect of your topic? Does it match your expectations? Does the resource cover the right time period? |
| Objectivity | <p>Is the information based on fact, opinion, or propaganda? Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence? Are the ideas and arguments advanced in line with other works you have read on the same topic?</p> <p>What point of view does the author represent? Is the article an editorial that is trying to argue a position? Is the Web site sponsored by a company or organization that advocates a certain philosophy? Is the article published in a magazine that has a particular editorial position? Recognize the point of view of the author and assess it accordingly.</p> |
| Audience | What type of audience is the author addressing? Is the publication aimed at a specialized or a general audience? Is this source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for your needs? |
| Coverage | Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? Does it extensively or marginally cover your topic? |
| Primary vs. secondary sources | <p>Is the material primary or secondary in nature?</p> <p>Primary sources are the raw material of the research process. Secondary sources are based on primary sources. For definitions see the <i>Glossary of Library Terms</i> at: http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/reference/help/general/glossary.shtml</p> |
| Writing style | Is the publication organized logically? Are the main points clearly presented? Do you find the text easy to read? Is the author's argument repetitive? |
| Reference sources | <p>Reading how others have evaluated a book may help you decide whether to use that book in your research. There are a number of indexes you can consult that provide references to book reviews, for example: <i>Book Review Index</i>, <i>Book Review Digest</i>, or <i>Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature</i>. Ask at the Reference Desk for other suggestions.</p> <p>For Web sites, consider consulting one of the evaluation and reviewing sources on the Internet, for example: <i>Evaluating Web pages: Techniques to Apply and Questions to Ask</i> http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html</p> |