



Evaluating traditional print sources of information

You may know that it's important to evaluate the information you find on web pages, but it's important to remember that you also need to evaluate information found in books and journal articles, too. Critical evaluation of your sources of information has always been a fundamental component of research, no matter in which format the information is presented or published. Some of the fundamental questions to consider during evaluation are:

AUTHOR

Note that authors may be individuals or organizations.

- Who is the author? Besides knowing his or her name, look for information on the author on the book cover or introduction, or in sidebars or footnotes for journal articles.
- What are the author's credentials (degrees, positions, honors)? You can use library catalogs and periodical indexes to try to find out what else the author has written.
- If the author is an organization, what can you find out about this organization? For example, what is its purpose?
- Reference librarians can help teach you how to find this kind of information using the library. Don't expect everything to be on the web.

PUBLISHER

Knowing the reputation of a publisher is as important as knowing something about the author.

- Who is the publisher? What else have they published? Do they have specific types of topics or fields in which they specialize?
- Know the differences between scholarly publishers (such as university presses and scholarly associations) and commercial publishers, government agencies, and other types of publishers.
- Self-publishing one's own works is often called "vanity" publishing. The work usually lacks any kind of outside editing or review.
- Consider whether it makes a difference which type of publisher has presented the work in question.

PEER REVIEW

Subject experts judge the quality and accuracy of submitted writings before they're published.

- Scholarly works - both books and research articles - undergo extensive editing and review, often by a panel of experts and editors, *before* they're published. Any editorial questions must be resolved by the author before the work can be accepted for publication.
- Edited works and research journals generally will list the names of the editors or editorial board who are responsible for reviewing materials *before* they're published. If there are editors listed for the work you're consulting, who are they, and what are their credentials?
- Peer-review and editing is an attempt to control the quality and the accuracy of publications. Works that do not meet the standards of a given publisher, a peer-reviewed journal, or an editor are *not* accepted for publication.

PURPOSE

An author's purpose should be clear. Sometimes authors try to present opinion as fact in order to sell or persuade.

- Does the book / journal article present fact or opinion?
- What is its purpose? To inform? To sell? To persuade?
- Is the material objective, showing multiple sides of an issue? Bias is not necessarily reason to reject a source - but be sure that you can identify it.
- Who is the intended audience? Advanced researchers in a field? Elementary school students? Members of a particular organization or viewpoint?

CONTENT

Consider the information presented in the work, and how it is organized.

- Is the coverage of the topic complete? Does it leave out important information? Is the approach basic or advanced? Does it offer more than one perspective?
- Research articles and scholarly books should include bibliographies, or lists of works consulted. Consider the length, detail, and accuracy of the bibliography in relation to the

work in question. Does the bibliography seem comprehensive, or are just a few sources mentioned?

USEFULNESS

Consider whether the information is what *you* need for your purposes.

- Does the book / journal article cover the topic you need? Is that coverage sufficient, or is it too superficial (or too detailed) for your purposes?
- Any particular book or journal article can be a wonderful source for some purposes, but not relevant for others. Consider what you need the information for, and be critical - don't choose your sources based on how easily you found them. Make sure the content is useful and relevant to your topic.

ACCURACY

Verify information *before* you use it in your own research or class assignments.

- Is the book or article well written and well-edited? Are there noticeable mistakes in spelling or grammar? Is it written in a style that you would expect for the topic and audience?
- In research books and articles, is there a bibliography, or footnotes, or other means of listing sources the author consulted?

CURRENCY

Know when your information was published, and decide whether this makes a difference.

- When was the book or article written? When was it published? Is the information still current or valid? If the information is no longer current, does it still have value for your needs?
- Know the difference between current, dated, and outdated information, as well as those sources considered "classics" in your field. Different disciplines will have different needs as to the importance of currency versus older, established publications and materials.

For more information on evaluating books and journal articles, you may wish to consult these other useful guides:

- [How to Critically Evaluate Information Sources](#), Cornell Libraries