

EVALUATING YOUR SOURCES

Once you have found some possible sources of information, either in print or online, you should always read them carefully, noting any questions you may have, any doubts or ambiguities that you may discover in the work. Ask yourself questions:

- If facts and figures are presented, where did they come from?
- Are they the result of government or university studies?
- Could they be the results of biased or incomplete samples?

You are more of an authority than you may think -- if the work leaves you with some doubts as to its reliability, then using it to back up your own arguments will leave your readers in doubt as well.

AUTHORITY:

Careful reading can be your best clue to a writer's authority. Question your sources carefully:

- Does the author have first-hand knowledge or experience?
- Are arguments and supports presented logically and in an easy-to-follow order?
- Are facts and figures from reliable sources used to support the author's position when necessary?
- What kind of ethos, or personal authority, does the author present?
- Are the author's appeals based on logic (logos) or are they appeals to the reader's emotions (pathos)?

Some clues to the authority of a work can often be found outside the work itself. For print sources, the title page or book jacket gives important information: a university press such as Columbia University Press or Oxford University Press will probably wield more authority than a trade press targeted toward a more popular market. However, this will depend to a large extent on your topic. Sometimes the most authoritative source might be found in as unlikely a place as a comic book.

The author's credentials may include his or her own personal knowledge, his or her education or demonstrated expertise, or may even reside in the presentation of the work itself, if it is logical and well documented. Is the source cited in other works? Sometimes this can be a good clue to the authority of the source. Be careful, however; just because a work is referenced in other sources does not automatically grant it credibility, especially if the other sources have disputed the information it contains. If in doubt, check with your teacher or the librarian.

The ease of publication on the internet makes it possible for virtually anyone with the necessary technological skills to become a "published" author on the World Wide Web. It is often difficult to ascertain what the author's credentials may be, and there is usually no review or selection process for pages published on the Internet.

The World Wide Web (WWW) does have a kind of "book jacket" through--the domain name. The domain name is usually the first part of the Internet address (called the Uniform resource Locator, or URL), and can provide some important clues to the location of the author (and, hence, perhaps to the authority of the author). For example, a document at <http://www.cas.usf.edu> resides on the World Wide Web server (www) for the college of Arts and Sciences (cas) at the University of South Florida (usf), and educational institution (edu). Generally, the last part of the domain name or Internet address gives valuable clues as to the type of site where the information resides:

.com	A commercial server or business
.org	An organization, often a non profit
.edu	An educational institution
.gov	A government server

Outside of the United States, domain names may end with the abbreviation for the country of origin. For example, <http://www.unimelb.edu.au>, is the World Wide Web server (www) for the University of Melbourne (unimelb), an educational institution (edu) in Australia (au). Some common abbreviations include;

.au	Australia
.ca	Canada
.jp	Japan
.uk	United Kingdom
.nz	New Zealand

Of course, many personal home pages can be found on University servers--some of little interest to anyone but the student and his or her friends, and many commercial sites may be maintained as a public service or may be used by scholars to provide useful and serious work. Just as with traditionally published sources, then, your topic and your own critical reading skills will be your best judge.

The taxonomy of the URL, or Uniform Resource Locator, breaks down into specific parts; the type of protocol used to access the resource, the domain name where the file resides, any directories and/or sub-directories, and the file name and type. URL's may not have some or all of these parts. It is important however, when citing sources, that you include the entire URL as shown in the "Location" box in your browser.

Protocol	Domain	Directory	Sub-Directories	File	File Type
http://	www.cas.usf.edu	english	walker	mla	.html
http://	www.m-w.com				
http://	www.columbia.edu	acis	documentation/ghhttp	search-info	.html

TIMELINESS:

You will usually want to use the most recent sources you can find on a subject since these will not only reflect current trends and knowledge but will usually build upon (or refute) older work. Of course, this often depends on your subject--if you are trying to show how the sexual revolution of the 1960's affected marriage and divorce rates at the time, you may want to look at some magazine and journal articles or books written during that time period as well as at later students that look back on the period.

As you probably already know, journals and magazines are usually more recent sources than books simply because of the time involved in publication. Book publishing can be a time-consuming process and, often, by the time the book comes out in print, much of the information in it is already old news or out of date. You probably already look to indices of journals, magazines, and newspapers when you need to find more current information.

One of the distinct advantages of the Internet is the speed of publication--papers can be written and published on the same day. The Internet, then, can represent a source of up-to-the-minute information. Of course, being up-to-the-minute is not always the same thing as being authoritative. And, even on the Internet, sometimes Web pages are left to die, forgotten and seldom visited. Publication dates may have been omitted, so ascertaining how current a source is on the WWW may be difficult or impossible. Thus, although you want to look for current information, you also want to make sure that the work you use is reliable. This is a good reason why you should not rely on only one source for your research, either on the Internet or in print.

RELEVANCE:

There is no magic formula to determine how relevant a given source is on your topic. The best determiner, of course, is your own critical judgement.

- Does the information answer important questions that you have raised?
- Does it support your propositions or present counter-arguments that you need to address?
- Does it present examples or illustrate important points in your paper?

Do not include a source just because the information is interesting or just to add more titles to your Works Cited page. Above all, don't let your sources use you. You are conducting research to find answers to find support, and to find illustrations of your thesis. Do not simply put together a paper that summarizes the research that others have done without having a point of your own. In determining how relevant a source is to your work, you must first determine what it can add to your own work. Of course, if it makes important points that you had not previously considered or convincingly disproves your own point of view, ethics will dictate that you acknowledge it in your work.

One important advantage that conducting online research may have is precisely that you will find sources of information that may not be included in library collections. Some of these may reflect points of view that need to be considered, whether or not they are "authoritative." If a Web search of your topic returns many sites that provide biased information, this might reflect a need to counter emotional appeals and misinformation that may have been widely disseminated in the popular presses.

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE:

During the course of your research, you will probably read many different sources on your topic, some of which will examine the same areas but will arrive at very different conclusions. Even facts and figures can be interpreted in many different ways (Is the glass half empty or half full?). Authors do not write in a vacuum; we all come to the work with our own biases, preconceptions, and objectives. Sometimes the author's bias or purpose is explicit-- the thesis statement may clearly define what the author wants to prove. Sometimes, however, only careful reading will help you to discover the author's true purpose.

The choice of audience can be one key to discerning the author's biases. The choice to publish documents on the World Wide Web verses in-print publication, or to post to a public listserv or newsgroup rather than writing a letter to the editor of a print magazine or newspaper, can sometimes provide clues since the audiences for print and for electronic publications are different. For example, you can expect online audiences to have some knowledge of computers. An article written for a student newspaper on proposed tuition increases might present a different perspective than an article for the university's Board of trustees. Biases are not necessarily bad, but you do need to consider them in determining the value and credibility of your sources.

A POINT TO REMEMBER:

Scholarly writing is an ongoing conversation, something that becomes quite visible in electronic discussion list and Web pages. But even in traditional print papers, giving proper credit to others for their words and ideas makes visible the thread of the conversation. Most student plagiarism is not intentional; poor note taking can often result in unintentional plagiarism. Students often do not realize that it is necessary to denote even one or two word quotations. Paraphrases and summaries, as well as direct quotations, must also be cited. No matter where your information comes from--books and articles, television, interviews and discussions, or electronic formats--make sure you give credit. In **CITING YOUR SOURCES** I will show how to cite electronically-accessed information.