

Evaluating Sources: Brief Guidelines for Students

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Not all sources are created equal. Some present information that has been carefully gathered and checked. Others report information, even rumor, that is second- or thirdhand or, worse, perhaps not even based on fact. Perhaps worst of all, some unethical people claim that truthful information is “fake news” or they simply lie (See Section F).

Some sources make claims that are accompanied by strong evidence and reasoning. Others make claims based only on opinion, or they use information illogically. Some are written by experts wanting to advance knowledge. Others are produced by people wanting to promote special interests even if it means ignoring data, oversimplifying issues, or overpromising results. Some sources have been reviewed by experts and published only after passing standards. Others appear without anyone judging their quality.

As a college writer, you don't want to use weak sources that hurt your ETHOS, mislead your readers, and ruin your paper. Therefore, evaluate each source you find by asking six questions

Six questions for evaluating sources

1. How did you find the source? (See A.)
2. Is the publisher authoritative? (See B.)
3. Is the author qualified to write about the topic? (See C.)
4. Does the source have sufficient and credible evidence? (See D.)
5. Does the source pass other critical thinking tests? (See E.)
6. Does the source contain DISINFORMATION? (See F.)

A. How did you find the source?

Sources that you find through DATABASES, especially databases you access through a library Web site are more likely to be useful than sources found through a general Internet search. A source in a database has been edited and checked for quality. The more scholarly a database is, the more confident you can be that its sources are reliable.

B. Is the publisher authoritative?

The publisher is the company or group ultimately responsible for a book, periodical, or Web site.

Box 2: Reliable and Unreliable Sources

Reliable sources are . . .

- **From reputable publishers.** Generally, encyclopedias, textbooks, and academic journals, such as the *Journal of Counseling and Development*, are authoritative, as are books from university and other established presses (such as Pearson); sources published in major newspapers, such as *The Washington Post* or *Wall Street Journal*; and in established general-readership magazines such as *Time* or *Harper's*.
- **Web sites from educational, not-for-profit, or government organizations.** Web sites from professional associations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English or the American Medical Association, are reliable.
- **Direct online versions of authoritative print sources.** Many journals, newspapers, and book publishers release online versions of print publications. Online versions of authoritative publications are reliable.
- **Serious publications designed to inform or argue responsibly.** They are based on facts and careful analysis, even if they advocate a certain position.

Questionable sources are . . .

- **From special-interest groups.** Some groups exist only to advance a narrow interest or political viewpoint. Examples would be a group existing only to legalize marijuana or one to stop all immigration. -Special-interest groups might publish useful sources, but you want to check their facts and reasoning by asking “Why does the group exist?” Apply other tests listed in this chapter.
- **Web sites from commercial enterprises** may or may not provide evidence or list sources for claims they make. If they fail to do so, or if the evidence and sources seem weak, don't use them.
- **Secondhand excerpts, quotations, and references.** Quoted or summarized material may have been edited in a biased or inaccurate manner. Always check the original
- **Satirical publications designed mainly to entertain or publications that are intentionally misleading.** People sometimes fail to recognize something as satire (totally exaggerated for a humorous effect) and instead take it for fact, as with *The Onion*.

C. Is the author qualified to write about the topic?

Anyone can express an opinion or argue for an action, but the only writers worth quoting or summarizing in your writing have knowledge and expertise about their topics. Often, their cre-

credentials appear in a note in an introduction, at the bottom of the first page, or at the end of an article. In a book, look for an “About the Author” statement, on a Web site a short biography or a “Contributors” note. Sometimes you might need to do some research to learn about the author.

Box 3: Is the Author Qualified to Write About the Topic?

Reliable sources are . . .

- **From expert authors.** Experts have degrees or credentials in their field. Biographical material in the source may list these credentials. If in doubt, look up the author in a biographical dictionary, search online for a résumé or bio, or search a database. Check if the author’s name appears in other reliable sources. Check whether there is contact information for questions or comments.

Questionable sources are . . .

- **From authors with fuzzy credentials.** A warning sign should flash when you can’t identify who has produced a source. Discussion threads, anonymous blogs, and similar online postings are questionable when they don’t give information about the writer’s qualifications. Check to make sure that listed credentials fit the topic. Just because someone has a graduate degree in history, for example, doesn’t qualify the person to give medical advice.
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D. Does the source have sufficient and accurate evidence?

If an author expresses a point of view but offers little evidence to back up that position, reject the source.

Box 4: Does the Source Have Sufficient and Accurate Evidence?

Reliable sources are . . .

- **Well supported with evidence.** The source’s writer provides clear and plentiful facts and reasons to support assertions.
- **Factually accurate.** The sources for statistics, quotations, and other information are listed. You or anyone can look them up to check their accuracy.
- **Current.** Information is recent or, in the case of Web sites, regularly updated.

Questionable sources are . . .

- **Unsupported or biased.** They carry assertions that have little or no supporting evidence.
 - **Factually questionable.** They may include statistics or other information, but they fail to identify who generated it. You have no way to check facts.
 - **Outdated.** You don’t want to cite 20-year-old medical advice, for example.
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Sometimes a source seems to use evidence and logic, but it does so inaccurately or badly. For example, Source A advances a wild (and totally groundless) conspiracy theory that the Denver International Airport actually camouflages a huge military base. It claims that in 2011 a comet missed Earth by 22 miles. Actually, that comet missed Earth by 22 *million* miles, as explained by Source B, NASA expert Don Yeomans. Always be sure to check facts.

A. BAD SOURCE

President Obama was in Denver Sept 27th last year when Comet Elenin passed by the earth, “barely missing” us by 22 miles. Some say, that if the comet would have struck earth, it’s back to the stone-age for us. Nonetheless, their [sic] was a chance that it could have hit and President Obama was conveniently ushered to Denver . . . which, in my opinion, adds more to the existence of not only a military bunker, but also the largest, most advanced bunker in the US. . . .

—thehive.com/2012/03/08/something-is-rotten-in-the-denver-airport-25-photos/

B. CREDIBLE SOURCE

The scientific reality is this modest-sized icy dirtball’s influence upon our planet is so incredibly minuscule that my subcompact automobile exerts a greater gravitational influence on Earth than the comet ever would. That includes the date it came closest to Earth (Oct. 16), when the comet’s remnants got no closer than about 22 million miles (35.4 million kilometers).

—www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/asteroids/news/elenin20111025.html

E. Does the source pass other critical thinking tests?

Use CRITICAL THINKING skills when you evaluate a source

Box 5: Does the Source Pass Other Critical Thinking Tests?

Reliable sources are . . .

- **Balanced in tone.** The source is respectful of others and creates a sense of fairness.
- **Balanced in treatment.** The author advocates a credible position but also acknowledges different viewpoints. For example, they summarize contradictory evidence.
- **Logical.** The source draws fair conclusions from evidence. The reasoning is clear.
- **Well edited.** The source has been proofread and is free of grammatical errors.

Questionable sources are . . .

- **Biased in tone.** Some warning signs of biased tone are name-calling, sarcasm, stereotyping, or absolute assertions about matters that are open to interpretation. For example, if a source declares, “Television programs are never worth watching” or that “Women are always better than men at writing,” you are encountering bias.
- **One-sided.** The author omits any mention or fair summary of -competing views or gives unreliable information, especially if openly ridiculing competing positions.
- **Full of logical fallacies.**
- **Marked by errors.** Beware if the source has typos or sloppy errors.

F. What is “fake news?”

People use the term “fake news” two different ways. Some use it irresponsibly to discredit things that, in fact, are actually true. Usually they do this for news they find unfavorable or damaging. The other sense of “fake news” is information that is actually false. “**Disinformation**” is a better term for news that is intentionally wrong.

In recent years, some politicians have complained about “fake news.” They claim that a reporter, researcher, or scholar has invented a fact or event, even when they know it’s true. For example, people have said that reports about something they said is “fake” when there are multiple good witnesses and actual video footage that shows them saying it. People may not like certain facts, but to call them “fake news” is wrong.

Falsely claiming that something is fake is dangerous. Facts are crucial to democracy. Reasonable people may disagree about what action to take in light of a fact, but they should grant the fact, and then argue what we should do with it.

Unfortunately, unethical people do sometimes make things up for an advantage. We have seen people use social media to accuse an American president of not being born in the United States. We have seen someone claim that the 26 school children killed in a terrible school shooting were pretending. Such lies deserve the term “fake news.” A better term is probably “disinformation” or just plain “lies.”

Professional journalists follow a code of ethics that requires them to be accurate and serve the public good. When their work appears in professional media (sometimes called “mainstream media,” with examples like *The Washington Post* or the *Wall Street Journal*), editors and fact checkers work hard to ensure accuracy. Professional media make clear distinctions between news, analysis, and opinion. You can learn more about professional journalism standards from the Poynter Institute, at <https://www.poynter.org>.

Box 6: Strategies for evaluating if news is “fake”

1. Read beyond headlines that can distort facts; read the whole story, get into details, and check evidence.
 2. Look for confirmation of facts by professional journalists.
 3. Use a fact checking site like Snopes.com or Politifact.com.
 4. Look for the “root” of the story by clicking links back to an original source that you can evaluate for credibility.
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