

Evaluating the Credibility of Your Sources

Remember, your use of sources is a means of supporting the argument you make. This means that the sources you reference need to be credible and authoritative. How do you know that your sources are of value? Ask yourself the following questions:

Is the source objective?

- **Evaluate Consistency.** Sources that apply different standards to those who agree and disagree with them are suspect. If your source praises one politician for "changing to meet the needs of his constituency", but then criticizes an opposing politician for "changing his position with opinion polls", it is likely that the source is biased.
-

Who wrote it?

- **Research the author.** A source is more credible if written by someone with a degree or other credentials in the subject of interest. If no author or organization is named, the source will not be viewed as very credible. However, if the author is presenting original work, evaluate the merit of the ideas-- not the credentials. Credentials have never guaranteed innovation and the history of science tells us that the big advances in sciences tend to come from outsiders, not the establishment. Some questions that you should ask about the author are:^[1]
-

- Where does the author work?
- If the author is affiliated with a reputable institution or organization, what are its values and goals? Do they benefit financially by promoting a particular view?
- What is his or her educational background?
- What other works has the author published?
- What experience does the author have?
- Has this author been cited as a source by other scholars or experts in the field?

Is the piece timely and appropriate for its field?

- **Check the date.** Find out when the source was published or revised. In some subject areas, such as the sciences, having current sources is essential; but in other fields, like the humanities, including older material is critical.^[1] It's also possible that you're looking at an older version of the source, and an updated one has since been published. Check with a scholarly database for academic sources (or an online bookstore for popular sources) to see if a more recent version is available. If so, not only should you find it, but you can also feel more confident about the source--the more printings or editions, the more reliable the information.^[1]
-

For whom is the source written?

- **Identify bias.** If the source's author is known to be emotionally or financially connected with the subject, be aware that the source may not fairly represent all views. Sometimes research is necessary to determine relationships that indicate the possibility of bias
 - Be conscious of wording that indicates judgment. Conclusions that describe something as "bad or good" or "right or wrong" should be examined. It is more appropriate to compare something to an objective standard than to label it with words that represent abstract concepts. Take for example, "...these and other despicable acts..." vs. "...these and other illegal acts...". The latter describes the acts in terms of the law (an objective source, somewhat) whereas the first example judges the actions according to the author's own belief of what is a despicable act.

Variety of Reviews?

- **Check the reviews.** Find reviews for the source. In the US, you can check *Book Review Index*, *Book Review Digest*, *Periodical Abstracts*. If the book is aimed at a layperson, check reviews online and see how and why others criticized the source. If there is significant controversy surrounding the validity of the source, you may wish to avoid using it, or examine it further with a skeptical eye.
-