Evaluating Sources of Information

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Topics covered:

Getting Started

Evaluating a Bibliographic Citation at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_evalsource2.html

Evaluating Content in the Source at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_evalsource3.html

Evaluating Internet Sources at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_evalsource4.html

Further Resources at http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_evalsource5.html

Getting Started

There's a lot of information out there, not all of which is trustworthy.

> We live in an information age. The quantity of information available is so staggering that we cannot know everything about a subject. For example, it's estimated that anyone attempting to research what's known about depression would have to read over 100,000 studies on the subject. And there's the problem of trying to decide which studies have produced reliable results.

Similarly, for information on other topics, there's not only a huge quantity out there but a very uneven level of quality. You don't want to rely on the news in the headlines of sensational tabloids near supermarket checkout counters, and it's just as hard to know how much to accept of what's in all the books, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, journals, brochures, Web sites, and various media reports that are available. People want to convince you to buy their products, agree with their opinions, rely on their data, vote for their candidate, consider their perspective, or accept them as experts. In short, you have to sift and make decisions all the time, and you want to make responsible choices that you won't regret.

Evaluating sources is an important skill we need all the time. It's been called an art as well as work—much of which is detective work. You have to decide where to look, what clues to search for, and what to accept. You may be overwhelmed with too much information or too little. The temptation is to accept whatever you find. But don't be tempted. Learning how to evaluate effectively is a skill you need both for your course papers and your life.

When writing research papers, you will also be evaluating sources as you search for information. You will need to make decisions about what to search for, where to look, and once you've found material on your topic, whether to use it in your paper.

Ask your self some questions before you start.

What kind of information are you looking for?

> Do you want facts? Opinions? News reports? Research studies? Analyses? Personal reflections? History?

Where would be a likely place to look?

> Which sources are likely to be most useful to you? Libraries? The Internet? Academic periodicals? Newspapers? Government records?

> If, for example, you searching for information on some current event, a reliable newspaper like the *NY Times* will be a useful source. Are you searching for statistics on some aspect of the U.S. population? Then, start with documents such as United States census reports. Do you want some scholarly interpretations of literature? If so, academic periodicals and books are likely to have what you're looking for. Want to know about commercial products? Will those companies have Web sites with information? Are you searching for local history? Then a county library, government office, or local newspaper archive is likely to be the most useful.