

Evaluating Sources

Why is this important?

Your ability to evaluate sources reflects your credibility as a thinker, researcher, and writer. There's a lot of information out there, and it's not easy to determine which sources are valid until you spend time answering specific questions: Who is the publisher, who is the author, and what is the author's agenda? Build up your credibility as a researcher by using valid sources, instead of compromising your writing or authority.

What questions should you ask when evaluating sources?

- Is the source up to date? Research findings change frequently. In some disciplines, recent research is considered the most authoritative. For example, in the sciences new findings tend to eclipse previous knowledge. In the humanities, debates tend to include important scholars from the past and present.
- Is the author an expert in their field who has done research on the topic? Consider the number of publications the author has, their educational background, and how many other authors cite their work.
- Where was the source published: an academic journal, magazine, newspaper, book chapter, or online site? Depending on your purpose, some sources will be more appropriate than others. If you are looking for scientific findings, you should search peer reviewed academic journals; however, if you are looking for the latest trends in social media, you would consult relevant social media profiles.
- If you are evaluating sources from a website, what is its domain? Bear in mind that the aim of .com websites is to generate clicks, while .org websites vary in bias and agenda. Even though the US government is the biggest publisher in the country, be sure to scrutinize the information from .gov websites as well.
- Is the content of the source truly focused on your topic? For example, if you are writing about the effect of global climate change on hurricanes in the Caribbean, you would not select a source that discusses how ocean temperatures are affecting the Great Pacific Garbage Patch.
- How biased does the author seem? Although every source has some bias, make sure the source identifies strong counter arguments and acknowledges the limitations of its findings.

A key takeaway is this: It's your duty to evaluate sources to maintain your credibility and convey a valid argument to earn your readers' trust. If evaluating sources is difficult for you, be patient. Your ability to evaluate sources will improve as you gain more experience reading and writing academic texts.