

A GUIDE TO EVALUATING ACADEMIC INFORMATION SOURCES FOR A RESEARCH ASSIGNMENT

AUTHORITY (How credible are the sources of this information?)

Authority—Self-assessment Questions and Explanations	
1. Identification of the author(s)	<p>Was the source written by one author, multiple authors, or an organization?</p> <p>It is important to know who wrote the article. A source’s validity is limited if its author cannot be identified.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the source has a corporate author, its objectivity can be called into question. • Multiple authors may add to a source’s credibility, if the authors have good credentials.
2. Credentials of the author	<p>Is the author an academic? If so what diplomas do they have? In which field and in which department do or did they work? Where do they teach or do their research?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A source written by an author or authors who are academics with a Ph.D. in the field has credibility. The source has even more credibility if the author or authors teach in a university department in a field related to the source’s topic. • If the author(s) are associated with a research institute or a non-academic institution, who finances it? Private donations, government grants, corporations? The answers to these questions are important in judging the relative validity of the information.
3. Other sources by this author	<p>Has the author written other publications?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of publications written by an author or authors on a similar subject may indicate the level of expertise/credibility they have on a specific topic. The author’s other sources may be of use to you. • Often, these other works are listed in the source’s bibliography, if it is the most recently written. (Yes, authors cite themselves.) • Of course, the author may have written other works after this article’s publication. Check the library’s catalogue and journal database, or search online.

PUBLICATION (Where does the information come from?)

Publication—Self-assessment Questions and Explanations	
1. Types of publication	<p>What do you know about the source’s publication information?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The type of publication in which articles appear is important. Scholarly publications, such as a journal found in an academic database like EBSCO or Science Direct, are reviewed by an editorial team, adding some weight to their credibility. • A book published by a reputable publishing house or university press usually has an editorial committee that follows, and approves, the publication of the book. If you have doubts about a publisher’s credentials, ask your librarian. • A web page requires inspection that is more rigorous: who publishes, hosts, or contributes to the site on which the article is found? Is it run by a corporation, a government agency, a research center, a university, a non-profit organization? Of course, websites that are not themselves academic, like Wikipedia, may nonetheless contain references to peer-reviewed works so can, in the initial stages of research, help lead you to credible sources.
2. Peer-reviewed sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To discover whether a publication has an editorial committee, look at the first few pages of the journal. N.B. Not all journals are peer reviewed. If an article is peer-reviewed, a committee of people specializing in the subject have read and approved the article for publication. Peer-reviewed articles tend to be more credible. • When using a journal database, click the “Scholarly journal or peer review” option. This will allow you to limit your search to peer-reviewed articles. • If working with a book, check the first few pages to see if it was published by a reputable publishing house or a university press.

Publication—Self-assessment Questions and Explanations	
	Again, if you are in doubt about which publishing houses are credible, ask your librarian.
3. Sources found on social media	<p>Is the source only found on social media?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You should be skeptical of information published solely on social media. In most cases, it is hard or impossible to judge its origin. Rarely do academics use social media to publish their research, although they may use it to share a link to their work (typically published in an academic journal or book). However, it is worth noting a recent trend among some academics to share their work openly online. Again, if in doubt about the source, check the academic's credentials.

CONTENT (What does your source contain?)

Content—Self-assessment Questions and Explanations	
1. Relevance of the source content	<p>Does the source address the topics related to your field of research (e.g. social science, English, science, humanities) and to your research question?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If the title contains more than just one of the concepts in your research question or hypothesis, chances are it will be relevant to your research. Look also at the headings and sub-headings of books and journals. If working with an article, read the abstract and skim through a few paragraphs to be see whether the work addresses your topic. If working with a book, look at its chapter headings and table of contents. Which specific part of your research does the source address? Does it provide information on an area of your research for which you lack documentation? Decide what type of information you need for your research (whether historical, statistical, current, comparative, etc.) and then make sure that the source contains that type of information.
2. Bibliography or works cited sections	<p>Does the source include a bibliography, references, or works cited section?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An academic source always contains these sections. If there is none, beware. Use the bibliography to find more sources. It can be an important source for these. The importance of this step cannot be overstated.
3. Footnotes, endnotes and in-text citations	<p>Does the source contain footnotes, endnotes, in text-citations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is rare for an academic book or article to lack such references to other works. Academics cite other academics as part of a community of ongoing learning. <p>N.B. If there are no in-text citations (parenthesis within the text containing the name of an author or title and a year) or footnotes at the bottom of the page, look at the end of the article, chapter, or book for endnotes.</p>
4. Methodology	<p>Does the source contain a methodology section?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If yes, how many pages is it? In certain fields of study, such a section is standard. In it, authors discuss how they gathered data to carry out their research, their sample, and describe their general methodology. If there is no such section, does the author address the issue of methodology? (N.B. some fields do not include such sections (e.g., literary studies).
5. Research question or thesis	<p>Does the source include a clearly stated thesis or research question relevant to your topic?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the thesis, research question, or hypothesis? How does it relate to your topic? What type of information can you use, for which part of your research?
6. Literature review	<p>Does the source include a literature review?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In some disciplines, many academic sources contain a review of literature related to their topic and current at the time of publication.

Content—Self-assessment Questions and Explanations	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Such a review puts the source into the wider context of scholarship on the subject, giving a sense of the author’s research and perspective. • The review can serve as a good source of information for your own research.
7. Opinion vs. Research	<p>Is the source an opinion piece or is it research-based?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the piece is an editorial, it offers an opinion and it is not grounded in research. Be careful how you use it (e.g., as an example of popular opinion rather than a source of substantiated research). In addition, an opinion offers the perspective of one individual, one not reviewed by an editorial committee. Such opinion pieces (often found in newspapers, blogs, or online comment threads, are rarely based on research and a careful study of facts. The only opinions that are taken into account in academia (with a few exceptions) are those of experts who base their opinions or interpretations on research and analysis.

CURRENCY (How up-to-date is your source?)

Currency—Self-assessment Questions and Explanations	
1. Publication date	<p>When was the source published?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depending on the field of study in question, the year of publication can be either moderately or very important. • If you are researching a topic based on current events, your sources should be as current as possible. Depending on how quickly discoveries or contributions are made in the field what is considered “current” may vary. For example, research on global warming that is older than a year might be outdated, but research on ancient Mesopotamia written 20 years ago may be considered current. • Journals tend to cover more current events or to be more cutting edge compared to books that take longer to publish.
2. Multiple editions	<p>Were other editions of this source published?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When working with a book, use its most recent edition whenever possible. If you can only find an earlier edition (say the 3rd out of 7), inform your reader of the fact, since later editions might have been reworked substantially.
3. Reviews of a source	<p>Are there any published reviews of, or responses or rebuttals to the source?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic journals often include reviews of books published in their fields. In fact, journals sometimes publish critiques, responses, or rebuttals to an article published in a previous issue. • Critical reviews can provide information on flaws, mistakes, or great ideas contained in a particular work. • Look for reviews in journal databases by typing in the name of the original author or authors and the title of the source.
4. Date of research	<p>When was the research conducted?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It’s important not to confuse the year research was conducted with the year it was published. An article may be published in 2017, but the research behind it may have been carried out in 2011. The gap in time does not invalidate the research, but does let you know how dated it is. In such a case, try to find more recent sources containing up-to-date recent research if working on a topic for which research must be current.
5. Currency of the source’s sources	<p>How current are the author’s sources?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the years in which the references listed in the bibliography were published. How recent your sources must be depends on your subject area. If you are researching the history of capitalism, it would not be atypical to find sources that date back many years. However, if no sources have been published in the last five years, you might want to look for more recent studies.

LANGUAGE (What is the style and level of language used in your source?)

Language—Self-assessment Questions and Explanations	
1. Language	<p>In what language is the source written?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with sources written in a language you and your reader understand. Even if you speak Italian or Urdu do not expect your reader to do so in order to verify the use you have made of the source.
2. Language level	<p>What level of language does your source use?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The level of language is important. Is the language overly simplistic (such as might appear in a Secondary I textbook) or is it made up of specialized, professional jargon and overly complex sentence constructions typical of doctoral research? In either case, avoid using such a source. Look instead for one that you and your classmates can understand <i>and</i> is written at least at a college-level.
3. Quality of language	<p>Are there errors in syntax, mechanics, or spelling?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Book and journal publishers employ professional editors. Frequent typos or grammatical or syntactical errors are a red flag that most likely indicate that the publication lacks credibility.
4. Tone of language	<p>Does the text contain language strongly expressive of emotions or attitudes?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic works tend to be fairly neutral and objective in their word choice. • Strong positions or emotional language can be found in opinion pieces or editorials, but, as mentioned, consider carefully how you might use these. They can offer an example of how someone has reacted to events or issues but should not be used as objective data or research.
5. Formatting	<p>Is the text divided into paragraphs with headings?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because journals and books have professional editors, the text is typically well organized with sections and sub-sections, divided into paragraphs that help the reader understand the material. The lack of such organizations could be another red flag.
6. Quotations and paraphrasing	<p>Does the author make excessive use of paraphrasing or citations?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An article or book cannot consist of a series of citations or paraphrases, unless it is an analysis of a specific work or body of work (as is often the case in literary studies). However, even in such cases, citations are typically followed by interpretation and analysis.