

Evaluating Your Research



A quality paper cites quality sources. If your sources are substandard, the quality of your paper will be mediocre at best. Furthermore, just because something is in print does not make it true.

Judging whether or not a source is credible is particularly difficult for someone who is new to an academic topic; someone who does not have a broad base of knowledge about the topic to apply to the newly found information.

In this section of the workbook, I will briefly present a variety of issues to consider when evaluating books, articles, other print sources, and web sites.

More detailed explanations of these issues can be found at

<http://writing.stevenberg.info/research/step05.html>

Issues to Consider When Evaluating Sources

Author

Credentials, Reputation, Bias

When considering an author's credibility, you need to consider his/her education, work experience, professional affiliations, and previous publications. You can judge an author's reputation by reading reviews about the work, determining if he/she has won any prizes or awards, and finding out if other people are citing their materials. All authors write from a point-of-view and therefore write from a bias.

Publisher

Reputation, Bias

Publishers specialize in the types of materials they publish. It is the decisions about what they publish that give them their reputation. These decisions also produce a bias we need to consider.



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Date of Publication

There is no magic number of years you can use to judge whether or not a source is current and whether the material found in it is still accurate. Scientific and medical publications lose their currency quickly. Publications in the liberal arts often have a longer period where they remain credible.

Research Methodology

Even if an author accurately reports the results of his or her research, the conclusions might not be valid. A poorly constructed research project will produce invalid results.

Bibliography/Footnotes

The most credible sources provide quality references to support their assertions.

Author's Preface/Introduction

By reading the preface and introduction, you can often learn about the methodology employed in the research, any bias the author is introducing into the text, upon whose work the author is building, and who has influenced the author.

Table of Contents/Headers

Glance down the table of contents in a book or the headings in an article. Your better quality publications will tend to have clear, straightforward titles and headers that make it easy for you to locate information in the publication.

Endorsements

Many books include endorsements on the cover. The content of the endorsements and the credibility of the persons who wrote them can help you judge the credibility of the book itself.

Use of Fiction in Research

Some individuals might mistakenly think that you can only use fiction as evidence when writing about literature. However, fiction can sometimes be used to illustrate points in research in other disciplines.



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Suggestion for Success

Because an author's peers have already vetted the article for credibility, you don't have to work hard to evaluate articles published in scholarly journals. You just need to recognize that the article appeared in such a journal.

Because peer reviewed journals are easy to find in your college's on-line databases, make sure to search those databases and use peer-reviewed articles as sources in your research paper.

On-Line Resources

- Evaluate Your Research
<http://writing.stevenberg.info/research/step05.html>
- Compiling an Annotated Bibliography
<http://writing.stevenberg.info/handouts/h033.html>
- Utilizing Schoolcraft College's On-line Databases
(Even if you do not attend Schoolcraft College, this resource will give general strategies about using databases; strategies you can use with the databases found at your own college.)
<http://writing.stevenberg.info/tutorials/using-databases/index.html>
- Evaluating Web Page Content
<http://writing.stevenberg.info/handouts/h010.html>

