Evaluating Your Sources

In writing a research paper, putting together a presentation, creating an online project, or doing other kinds of academic work, you will gather sources that inform, support, or otherwise help you shape your argument. The gathering of sources used to be more arduous than it is today: researchers had to spend hours in the library, tracking down printed indexes and bibliographies, locating the works uncovered, and then obtaining physical copies of the works. One part of this process used to be easier, however: a researcher could assume that the works found were reliable, since they were discovered through professionally compiled indexes and in professionally curated collections.

Today the Internet, with its many publications, databases, archives, and search engines, has accelerated the process of finding and retrieving sources—but at the same time it has complicated the researcher’s assessment of their reliability. The amount and variety of information available have grown exponentially, but the origins of that information are too often unclear.

The first step, therefore, in gathering sources for your academic work is to evaluate them, asking yourself questions such as these:

- **Who** is the author of the source? Is the author qualified to address the subject? Does the author draw on appropriate research and make a logical argument? Do you perceive bias or the possibility of it in the author’s relation to the subject matter?

- **What** is the source? Does it have a title, and does that title tell you anything about it? If it lacks a title, how would you describe it? Is it a primary source, such as an original document, creative work, or artifact, or a secondary source, which reports on or analyzes primary sources? If it is an edition, is it authoritative? Does the source document its own sources in a trustworthy manner?

- **How** was the source produced? Does it have a recognized publisher or sponsoring organization? Was it subjected to a process of vetting, such as peer review, through which authorities in the field assessed its quality?
Google and Wikipedia are reasonable places to begin your research but not good places to end it. Follow up on the sources that Wikipedia entries cite. (Be sure to read the pages accompanying a Wikipedia entry, which give its history and the editors’ discussions about it, since that information shows how the entry evolved and where the controversy in your subject lies.)

**Where** did you find the source? Was it cited in an authoritative work? Was it among the results of a search you conducted through a scholarly database (such as the *MLA International Bibliography*) or a library’s resources? Did you discover it through a commercial search engine that may weight results by popularity or even payment?

**When** was the source published? Could its information have been supplemented or replaced by more recent work?

These are only a few of the questions that you might consider as you evaluate the sources you use in your work. Both your judgment and your awareness of your readers’ expectations are crucial at this stage.

It is important to understand that research is a cyclic process. Scholars rarely find all the sources they need in a single search. You should expect to search, evaluate the sources you find, refocus or otherwise revise your searching strategy, and begin again.

As you do your research, keep complete, well-organized records that allow you to retrace your footsteps, since you may need to return to a source for more information. Keeping good notes will also simplify the task of documenting your sources. Digital reference managers can be helpful to this end, but they have limitations. They may overlook key information, capture the wrong information, or generate citations with improper formatting. You should understand how to create your own documentation even if you use a citation generator, so that you can correct the output and can produce it yourself if the citation generator is not available.

After gathering sources, evaluating them, and winnowing out those unsuitable for your research, you will record information about the ones you plan to consult. This information is the basis of your documentation.