

Library Ask & Learn

Evaluating sources guide

Why evaluate?

Not all information sources are equal. You have to decide if the information you have found meets your needs and is of sound quality. This guide will help you learn how to do this.

Currency: How old can the source be and still be useable?

It depends on your topic. The general rule is no older than ten years. In health and life sciences the rule is usually no older than five years for research articles and no older than ten years for books and other types of articles. It is important to check the publication date because information can become obsolete or unusable due to changes in practice, legislation or technology.

- Most databases and search engines will let you choose a date range.
- On websites it can be difficult to determine how up to date the information is. Not all websites have publication dates. Use your judgement and try to find a second, dated source to confirm the first.

Relevance: How much of the source is about your topic?

- How many times do your keywords appear in the abstract or article?
- Is the information comprehensive and how much information is provided?
- Who is the intended audience? Is the language used aimed at members of the public, students or academic researchers?

Accuracy: How reliable and correct is the source?

- Does it complement or contradict your own knowledge or information you found elsewhere?
- Are the facts supported by evidence or verified by another source?
- How was the source compiled?
 - Does it present research findings and is the research methodology explained?
 - Where there are calculations, are they free from errors?
 - Has the information been edited and checked for spelling or grammatical errors?
 - Is it logically structured?
 - Does it cite the work of others to support or refute their arguments? If so, are the references sufficiently detailed to allow follow-up?

Authority: Can I trust the author?

- Who is the author?
 - Journal articles and books often provide brief details of current employment and areas of expertise.
 - You can also run a search on the author in a database such as Web of Science.
- If there is no named author, what is the organisation who produced the information? Are they a professional body or a well-established organisation?

If you can't find out who the author is, or their level of expertise - do you really want to use the source?

- If it is an article, is it peer-reviewed (reviewed and accepted by subject experts prior to publication)?
- Is the journal or publisher reputable or well-known in your field of study?

Purpose: Why was the source written?

There are many types of sources. What is the purpose of the piece of writing you have found?

- Does it share recent research? For example, a journal article describing and explaining the process and outcomes of a scientific experiment.
- Does it aim to persuade you? For example, an advertisement or campaign literature from a charity or pressure group.
- Does it provide practical guidance? For example, trade journals or patient information leaflets.

What is the tone of the source?

- Is it based in fact or personal opinion?
- Is the argument balanced or one-sided?

Are the writer's links to sponsors or institutions made clear?

In conclusion

Sources are rarely all in complete agreement on a topic. Often academics will hold differing views and will attempt to support their hypotheses with research evidence. By demonstrating a depth of research in your work, you show consideration for all aspects of a topic. If there is contradictory or conflicting information that you have failed to consider, your conclusions may be questioned. You need to demonstrate that you are aware of alternative views and explain why you disagree.

These are some of the main general points to consider when assessing information.

If our guide hasn't answered your question on source evaluation or you need more help

[Contact your Librarian](#) [link opens in new window]

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