

Evaluating Information Sources



Information sources may be **primary** (direct or firsthand information), **secondary** (analyze, interpret, or discuss information about a primary information source), or **tertiary** (compile or index primary and secondary information sources). Regardless of the information sources you use when writing a paper, it is important to critically evaluate each source before you decide to use it. Here are the most important criteria to employ when evaluating information sources.

RELEVANCE

Since you are the one who is writing the paper, you are the best judge of the relevance of the information source. The information source may be excellent, but will be of no use to you if it doesn't relate to what you are trying to bring out in your paper. If you judge the information source to be not relevant, do not even consider the criteria that follow. Simply move on to another information source. If you judge the information source to be relevant, carefully consider the criteria that follow before you use it.

DATE OF PUBLICATION

Information about a subject changes over time as new information emerges and old information is changed or replaced. If currency of information is important for your paper, try to find the most recent information sources pertaining to your subject. If you are drawing information from a book, be certain you are using its most recent edition.

AUTHORITY

Consider both the expertise of the author and the legitimacy of the publisher. The author should be qualified and have appropriate credentials related to the subject. The publisher should be known in the field. Avoid "vanity presses" where anyone can have something published for a fee.

ACCURACY

The information should be consistent with that from other information sources as well as from your own knowledge. Consider the sources the author cites. Be cautious if the information contains grammatical errors and misspelled words. These are signs that the information was poorly edited or perhaps not edited at all.

OBJECTIVITY

The author should present a balanced view of various perspectives on the subject. Look for signs that the author is presenting a biased view and is trying to convince you of that view. Try to avoid using information sources which are published, sponsored, or endorsed by a special interest group or a private company.

Here are some tips about specific information sources. Information on the Internet is typically unfiltered. Anyone can create a website on a subject, even if they are not qualified on the subject. Therefore, you have to be particularly careful when using information from the Internet. Books published by reputable publishers are typically reviewed and edited for accuracy of content. This is also true for newspapers and popular magazines, and their authors are held accountable for what they write. Articles in scholarly journals undergo a rigorous peer review process and are very trustworthy.

We are in the information age in which the number of available information sources keeps growing. Using the criteria described in this article will help you select those that are best for your purpose.