

Evaluating Information

..... Credible Sources

The word *credible* means believable or trustworthy. There are a number of things influencing whether or not we can or should believe the information we read or are told. Among these are how authoritative the source is, whether it is supported by evidence, and whether or not it has been reviewed by other trustworthy sources.



Authority & expertise

This can mean education level, experience, respectability within a community, and more.



Research & references

High quality evidence can mean that the claim or finding is backed by research, or that high quality sources are cited.



Edited or peer-reviewed

Editorial oversight guarantees that the information is not just made up. A source that has also been reviewed by experts is more credible.



01.

Authority and expertise

In general, we respect information from authors who are educated in the subject areas they are writing about, and who have experience working in the field, or researching the topic. We can search for information about them to confirm their level of expertise, including what degrees they hold, where they work, how many publications they have, and how frequently their work has been cited by others.

Authority does depend on the context. For example, someone could be quite educated, but have no actual experience in the field they are writing or speaking about. Opinions should also be separated from factual research findings. Even a highly educated researcher might share opinions about topics that are outside their area of expertise, and those should be taken with a grain of salt.

Supported by Evidence



02.

Evidence

A source is more credible when it is backed up by evidence. This can mean that experts were consulted in reporting a story, that data or statistics were used to make a point, or that sources like scholarly research studies were cited.

When evaluating whether or not a source can be trusted, look for both in-text citations and a reference list that cite the sources the author used to come up with the information or to back up claims.



03.

Editorial Oversight and Peer-Review

Fact-checkers

Newspapers and news magazines usually have fact-checkers on staff, so when you read these sources you can be reasonably assured they are reporting correct information.

Editors

An editor has responsibility over the content they publish, so they are usually invested in ensuring the information published is true and accurate.

Peer-review

Peer-review is a process in which experts in a field (peers) review the work of researchers before it can be published. This ensures rigor and accuracy.

Vetted sources

Sources that have been critically evaluated by pros such as librarians and database publishers are more likely to be trustworthy. Your library is the best place to start.

..... Choosing Credible Sources: Why Use the Library?

First of all,

If you are using a library search tool such as a database or Primo, you are off to a good start finding credible sources.



The search tools that the library offers have been evaluated and intentionally selected by the librarians to meet the needs of students and faculty here at EOU.



Because these resources are paid for, you get higher quality content, and access to subscription journals and other sources that you wouldn't be able to get for free.



You can count on the fact that the sources you will find are reliable and respected.

..... Evaluating Sources

In addition to ensuring that your source is relevant, there are a lot of criteria and contexts to consider when determining whether you should use a source. As you work with academic sources, practice, and become more familiar, evaluation will be easier and less time-consuming. These are a few of the things you should consider:



Date of publication

How recent is this information? How does that affect your topic? Things may have changed since publication.



Author expertise

What are the author's qualifications? Are they well published and regarded as an expert?



Accuracy

Is this based in sound research? Can the claims made here be verified in other sources?



Bias

Is the information presented in an unbiased, objective way? Why was this information produced in the first place?



Evidence

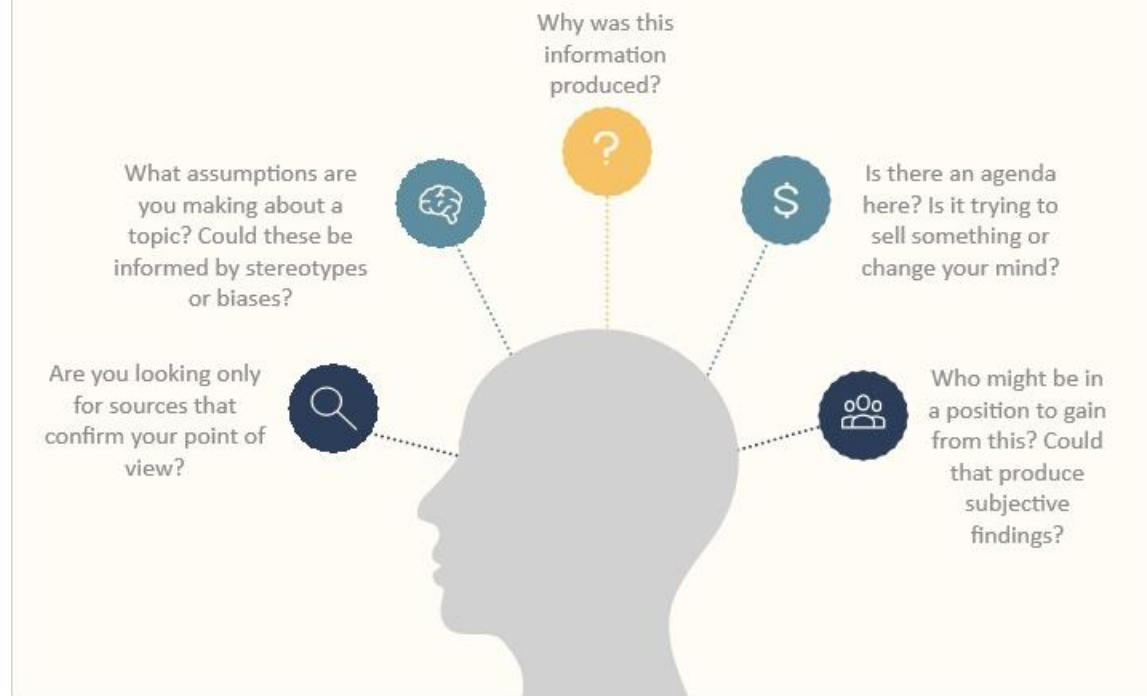
Does this source cite its sources? Are they high quality sources? The same evaluation criteria should apply.



Representation

Are there groups of people who are not represented here, or whose voices are missing?

..... Bias in the research process: Questions you should ask



..... Avoiding biased sources

There are many ways you should critically question information sources. You can start with considering how your own bias impacts your choice of source, and by questioning the purpose behind the information.

● CHALLENGING YOUR WORLDVIEW

We each hold a worldview that is based on our upbringing, where we grew up, people who have influenced us, culture, life experiences, and more. Often this leads to conscious or unconscious biases that influence our thinking in ways we may not have thought of. Try to be aware of the validity of other perspectives.

● CHALLENGING YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

It is human nature to make assumptions and to stereotype. As humans have evolved and adapted to different environments and conditions, this has helped us to make quick decisions in the face of threats. Just remember that assumptions and stereotypes can be wrong, and even harmful. Question your assumptions.

● QUESTIONING PURPOSE

This is particularly important. Think about why the information was produced in the first place. Does someone stand to make a profit or gain from this information? Are they trying to change your mind or push a particular agenda? It may still be factual, but the slant may impact the quality if it is not fair and balanced.

..... Evaluating Research Studies

Not all research studies are good. Some may have questionable methodologies or may not be repeatable. Others may not have been rigorously reviewed, or may have been influenced by bias. It is important to be critical in your evaluation. Here are a few things to watch for:



Preprints

Preprints are articles that have not yet been accepted by a journal. Though published online, they have not been evaluated by reviewers and journal editors for quality, accuracy, and methodology.



Open Access Journals

Some open access journals are highly regarded and even peer-reviewed. Others are predatory – they charge authors to publish their work and may accept just about anything, regardless of quality.



Peer Review

The highest quality journals are peer-reviewed, meaning experts review the research before it is accepted by the journal. These are the best types of sources to use when your instructor requires scholarly sources.



..... Summary

How do I know what's credible and what's not?

As you do more library research, and as you get further along in your academic career, identifying high quality research will get easier. There are certainly a lot of things to consider!

Your instructor is a great resource for helping you to understand whether a research methodology is sound. They may also recommend specific journals to use.

If you stick to databases when doing your research, you will be less likely to come across questionable research. A librarian can also help you determine whether an article that you find comes from a peer-reviewed journal or from a questionable one. Don't be afraid to ask!