Evaluating the Quality and Relevance of Sources

You can begin evaluating a physical information source (a book or an article for instance) even before you have the item in hand. Appraise a source by first examining the bibliographic citation. The bibliographic citation is the written description of a book, journal article, essay, or some other published material that appears in a catalog or index. The citation also gives proper credit to the creator of the work. Bibliographic citations characteristically have three main components: author, title, and publication information. These components can help you determine the usefulness of this source for your paper.

I. Elements to Assess in Determining Quality

A. Author

1. What are the author's credentials--institutional affiliation (where he or she works), educational background, past writings, or experience? Do they have an agenda? Is the book or article written on a topic in the author's area of expertise? Oftentimes, biographical information located in the publication itself can help to determine the author's affiliation and credentials.

2. Is the author associated with a reputable institution or organization? What are the basic values or goals of the organization or institution? What are the possible biases of the author or organization?

3. Has your instructor mentioned this author? Have you seen the author's name cited in other sources or bibliographies? Respected authors are cited frequently by other scholars. For this reason, always note those names that appear in many different sources.

B. Currency

1. When was the source published? This date is often located on the face of the title page below the name of the publisher. If it is not there, look for the copyright date on the reverse of the title page. On web pages, the date of the last revision is usually at the bottom of the home page, sometimes every page.

2. Is the source current or out-of-date for your topic? Topic areas of continuing and rapid development, such as the sciences, demand information that is more current. On the other hand, topics in the humanities often require material that was written many years ago. At the other extreme, some news sources on the Web now note the hour and minute that articles are posted on their site.
C. Edition or Revision

Is this a first edition of this publication or not? Further editions indicate a source has been revised and updated to reflect changes in knowledge, include omissions, and harmonize with its intended reader's needs. Also, many printings or editions may indicate that the work has become a standard source in the area and is reliable. If you are using a Web source, do the pages indicate revision dates?

D. Publisher

Note the publisher. If a university press publishes the source, it is likely to be scholarly. Although the fact that the publisher is reputable does not necessarily guarantee quality, it does show that the publisher may have high regard for the source being published.

E. Title of Journal

Is this a scholarly or a popular journal? This distinction is important because it indicates different levels of complexity in conveying ideas. See table on next page for ways to distinguish a scholarly journal from a popular journal.

Based on: