

Research in the Information Age

Module 1: Evaluation and Authority

Module Introduction

Readings

Required

Evaluating information found on the Internet. (2010). Retrieved from <http://guides.library.jhu.edu/evaluatinginformation>
(<http://guides.library.jhu.edu/evaluatinginformation>)

For Your Success

Welcome to LIB300 Research in the Information Age.

Scholars, students, and our communities at large have access to a plethora of information in an increasing number of formats. Unfortunately, the information encountered is typically uneven in terms of quality and reliability. Evaluating information sources is an important skill you can employ to sift through all of the information you come across. This skill is necessary in a variety of situations, from finding sources for a research project at CSU-Global to skills used on the job, while purchasing a product, or when casting a vote for a candidate. This module will help you identify clues to look for when evaluating information.

Note that you will be required to complete Critical Thinking (CT) Assignments by Sunday midnight of each of the four weeks of the course. Note as well that the fourth and final CT Assignment, due before Sunday midnight of Week 4, requires that you compile and create an annotated bibliography on a topic that you will select for this week's Discussion assignment. So it is recommended that you review the Module 4 CT Assignment and grading rubric, which can be accessed from the Module 4 folder, before submitting your initial post to this week's Discussion.

LIB300 Module 1

(Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teQIulLGzoY>)

Learning Outcomes

- . Apply evaluative criteria to resources.
- . Define different sources of authority.
- . Describe the scholarly research and review process in order to identify the difference between scholarly or peer-reviewed material and more popular sources.

1. Initial Criteria: Author and Accuracy

Author

When evaluating information, you'll want to look first for what is sometimes called bibliographic information: the **author, title, and date of publication**. This type of information is not only your first clue that you have encountered a credible source of information; it also provides necessary components if you need to construct a citation.

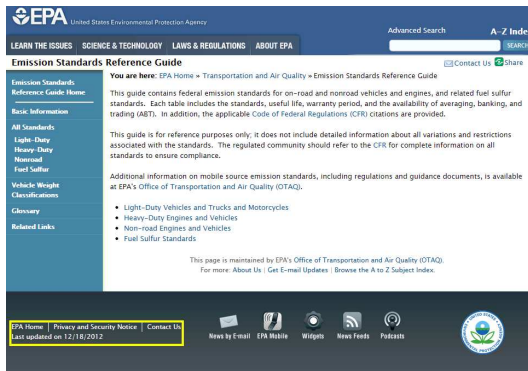
In-depth questions to consider include:

- . Who is the *author* (may be individual or organization) and/or *publisher*?
- . What are the credentials and affiliation or sponsorship of any named individuals or organizations?
- . Has the author or publisher produced other articles, books, or other material valued by his/her field?
- . Is the author(s) listed with contact information?

Do the author and publisher appear to specialize in writing/publishing certain topics or fields? Is the publisher scholarly (university press, scholarly associations)? Commercial? Government agency?

Figures 1 and 2 below provide some examples (highlighted in yellow) where author or publisher information can be found.

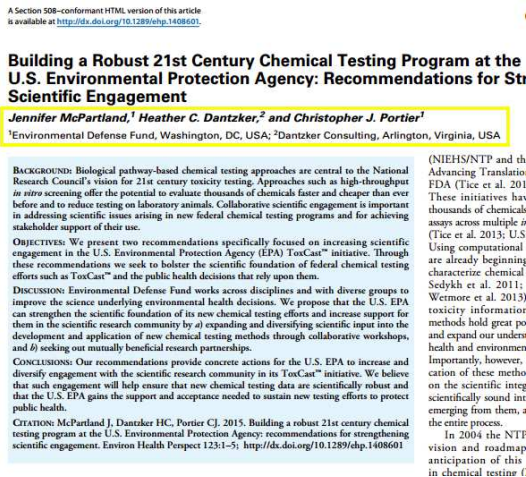
Figure 1: Website Example Screenshot



(Source: <http://www.epa.gov/oms/standards>)

Click to Enlarge

Figure 2: Scholarly Journal Article Example Screenshot



(Source: <http://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/wp-content/uploads/123/1/ehp.1408601.alt.pdf>)

Click to Enlarge

In many cases finding more information about the author or publisher can be as simple as quickly *Googling* the name of the author to see if she is an expert in her field or if it is just some ordinary citizen writing. That's why, in general, if you don't know who is writing or publishing the information, it's always a good idea to do a quick check to make sure that the author is someone you

can trust.

Accuracy

Accuracy, the ability to verify details, is an important part of the evaluation process. In many research instances you may not have the time or ability to independently verify details. Following are some questions to help you identify potential accuracy:

Is background information easy to look up or find?

Does the author of the work cite sources? This may or may not be in APA citation style, but the author(s) should be alluding to or displaying knowledge of related sources with proper attribution.

Extensive work has been carried out investigating the implementation of policy (cf. Bardach, 1978; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984; among others), which is a critical component of the policy process, but what about policy implementation in the environmental arena? Lipsky (1980), Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), Riccucci (2005) and others have widely documented the importance of frontline workers such as police officers, social workers, or teachers. But with few exceptions (cf. Pautz, 2009a, 2010; Pautz and Rinfret, 2011), the roles of frontline workers in US environmental policy remain understudied. Therefore, to begin to understand this population, we explore the role environmental regulators play

Does the source appear to be fact or opinion? If you think the source is offering facts, are the sources for those facts clearly indicated?

If the content is online, are the links in the writing still functional?

2. Initial Criteria: Currency

Currency of information is the determination of whether or not the information is *recent* enough to still be considered the best data available. Here are some questions and ideas to consider for recent research topics:

When was the information published? Publication dates are often located on the title page (copyright date) of printed materials or appear as a copyright date on websites (or last updated, followed by date).

Is the information provided by the source in its original form or has it been revised to reflect changes in knowledge?

Is this information timely and is it updated regularly?

One somewhat confusing issue with currency is that it varies based on research topic. Historical topics are clearly going to have a wider range of acceptable publication dates than would topics that are still developing, such as anything related to health or science. That being said, historical

information on any topic such as “first” evidence (primary sources) or news of important breakthroughs may be acceptable sources to consider. Watch this video from The Hartness Library that explains how primary sources may be determined:

Primary vs. Secondary Sources

(Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s13KpDtKAys>)

Summary: A Hartness Library resources that illustrates the differences between primary and secondary sources.

3. More Investigative Criteria: Relevance



Relevance is whether or not the information you have found aligns with your information needs. It can be difficult to determine relevance of a source if you are not looking at a large number of

resources, so be sure that in any research endeavor you give yourself plenty of time to search, sift, read, and search again.

When considering the relevance of information sources, ask yourself the following questions:

- How directly does this information match my research or question?
- Is the content relevant to my information needs?
- Is this information closer to my topic or less related than other content I have found?
- Who was this information written for?
- Are any conclusions offered? If so, based on and supported by what evidence?

4. More Investigative Criteria: Audience and Purpose



Beyond this is the question of **audience and purpose**—for whom is the information you have found intended and why. There is an intended audience for all written work and it will be your job to determine who that work was written for and what it is attempting to convey.

For example, imagine you are trying to complete a project at work. One of your coworkers is making project completion difficult. If you had to write and tell your supervisor about why your project is difficult to complete, what might you say? Now, imagine you were writing to a friend who doesn't work with you and relating the story about how you were unable to complete the project. Would you change the details you emphasize? Are there some details you might share with your friend that you wouldn't share with your supervisor (or vice versa)? As you can see, the way in which we communicate can change to appeal to different audiences.

Information is rarely neutral; the author often has an agenda for the audience. The following link to a website from John Hopkins Sheridan Libraries does a good job of explaining when considering points of view of bias an author might portray:

<http://guides.library.jhu.edu/content.php?pid=198142&sid=1657614>
(<http://guides.library.jhu.edu/content.php?pid=198142&sid=1657614>)

Here are questions to consider when determining audience and purpose:

Who is the intended audience?

Is anything being sold?

Does the writing leave you feeling as though you are being persuaded or convinced of something?

Are the arguments made in the writing supported with current, reliable facts or does the writing just share opinions?

Are there advertisements on the website? Are they related to the content you've located?

5. Recognizing Scholarly Authority

Experts or authorities on certain subjects differ—within any given community (for example biologists, artists, sports enthusiasts, or spiritual groups), authority is constructed by members of the community. While experienced researchers may know who is authoritative in their disciplines, less experienced researchers may need to rely on indicators of authority. In some research situations (checking the weather, for example) you may not need to rely on the foremost authority—any weather reporter or even your smartphone app may give you the information you need. Popular sources such as magazines, some websites, and various news media are perfect for instances where you don't need a top authority.

Meanwhile, professionals additionally rely on trade publications for information. Trade articles and publications provide practical information for professionals in a given field, including news, trends, and other updates.

In situations where needs for accuracy, currency, and relevance are more critical, especially those involved with scholarly research, you will want to seek out sources that are considered most authoritative in the field.

[Click here \(http://csuglobal.libguides.com/periodicals\)](http://csuglobal.libguides.com/periodicals) to read a CSU-Global Library resource about differences among types of periodical publications.

Many scholarly conversations among authorities happen in the form of peer-reviewed journal articles. It is in these journal articles that scholars formulate theories and hypotheses, debate, and seek answers. Oftentimes, the answers consider many perspectives over an extended period of time. In addition to facilitating scholarly conversations, peer review attempts to assess the quality of articles submitted for publication in specific journals. Before an article is deemed appropriate for publication in a peer-reviewed journal it must go through the following process:

The author(s) of an article must submit her or his work to a journal editor. The editor will forward

the article to other experts in the field (the author's "peers") in order to consider the article.

The reviewers carefully review the writing, evaluating the quality of the article by checking for accuracy.

If needed, the reviewers suggest revisions. If the article is lacking in validity or rigor, the reviewers reject it.

The image below depicts how the peer-review process works.



Click to Enlarge

Peer-reviewed journals refuse to publish articles that fail to meet the standards set forth by authorities in a given discipline. Therefore, published peer-reviewed articles are considered to contain the best research practices in the field.

While not all scholarly journals go through the peer-review process, it is usually safe to assume that a peer-reviewed journal is also scholarly. Remember, just because a journal is peer-reviewed does not guarantee that all articles in it have undergone the peer-review process. Some article types, such as news items, editorials, and book and article reviews, may not be peer-reviewed. Additionally, new formats for peer-reviewed articles are appearing. For example, some blogs provide a peer-review process for their posts. If you think you have encountered a peer-reviewed piece of writing on the free web, look for information about the editorial process and instructions for authors. If it has been peer-reviewed, you should be able to tell.

Just as different communities have different authorities, they also have different ways of setting up writing expectations for their authorities. The following resource from North Carolina State University illustrates the anatomy of a scholarly article, summarizing the basic points most scholarly articles contain. This format provides a good way to tell if an article is peer-reviewed.

<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/tutorials/scholarly-articles/>

Check Your Understanding

Click Here to Begin