

Evaluating Sources

Introduction

Before exploiting a source and decide to borrow material, there are some questions a student should ask when he considers the usefulness of a particular book, article, media resource, or Web site for his project. Evaluating the authority, value, and reliability of the information provided by a work is an important step in the process of bibliographical research. The evaluation of the source consists of asking different questions about the author and the publisher, the relevance, usefulness, and reliability/credibility of the work under scrutiny, and finally the material (information) it provides.

A/ External Evaluation:

The initial appraisal mainly consists of an external evaluation of the source. This includes an evaluation of the author, the date of publication, the publisher, and the type of journal if the source is an article.

The student can begin evaluating a physical information source (for example a book or an article) even before he has the physical item in hand. The student should appraise the source by first examining the bibliographic citation. This has three main components: author, title, and publication information. These components can help the student determine the usefulness of the source for his paper. In the same way, he can appraise a web site by examining the home page carefully.

1. The author

What are the author's credentials and institutional affiliation (where he or she works)? What is his educational background, past writings, or experience? Is the book or article written on a topic in the author's area of expertise? Has the author's name been cited in many sources or bibliographies? Authoritative authors are often cited. For this reason, the student should always note names of authors that appear in many different sources.

2. Date of Publication

When was the source published? Is the source recent or out-of-date for your topic? Topic areas of continuing and rapid development, such as the hard sciences, demand very recent information. On the other hand, topics in the humanities sometimes require material that was written years ago.

3. Edition or Revision

Is this a first edition of this publication or not? Numerous editions show that the source has been revised and updated to reflect changes in knowledge and meet with the readers' needs. Reedited works may include omissions or additions in the nature of the information. In addition, many printings or editions may confirm that the work has become a standard source in the area and is reliable.

4. Publisher

There are some publishers that are more reliable than others. Some are ideologically biased, others emphasize the commercial aspect of the publication without caring about the seriousness of the author or of the work. If the source is published by a university press, it

means that it has undergone some reviewing process and it is likely to be scholarly, thus serious.

5. Title of Journal

If the source is an article in a periodical, is this latter a scholarly or a popular journal? This distinction between types of journals (and articles) is important because it indicates different levels of complexity (language, terms, concepts...) in conveying ideas. It also indicates the intended audience.

B/ Internal Evaluation

Having made an initial appraisal, the student should then examine the body of the source. The preface or the introduction of the work is important to determine the author's intentions for the book. In addition, scanning the table of contents and the index gives a broad overview of the material it covers. It is important to note whether bibliographies are included or not. The student should also identify chapters that specifically address the topic of his research. Scanning the table of contents of a journal or magazine issue is also useful. As with books, the presence and quality of a bibliography at the end of the article reflects the care with which the author has prepared his work.

1. Intended Audience

What type of audience is the author addressing? Is the book relevant to your level? What about the language, the style, and the terms used? Are they understandable, technical, or even too complex for your research? Is the publication aimed at a specialized or a general audience? Is this content of the source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for the needs of the research?

2. Objective Reasoning

Is the information covered fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make you think their interpretations are facts.

Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and not supported by any evidence?

Are the ideas and arguments advanced more or less in line with other works on the same topic?

Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-arousing words and bias?

The writing style may also provide hints in the evaluation of a source. Is the publication organized logically? Are the main points clearly presented? Is the text easy to read? Is the author's argument recurring?

3. Coverage

Does the work update other sources, validate other materials from other sources, or add new information? Does it extensively or only marginally cover the research topic? The student should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.

Is the material primary or secondary in nature? The student can choose both primary and secondary sources when he has the opportunity to do so.