

## Critical Evaluation of Information Sources

(This guide is adapted from the outstanding “[Critical Evaluation of Information Sources Or, But Is It Credible?](#) by [Colleen Bell](#) at the University of Oregon Libraries. It is used with her permission.)

It is always important to critically evaluate information that you are using, either in a paper or to make a decision in your personal life. Sometimes this is easier to do than others. Many printed sources go through an editorial review process which means that either one person or several people agree that the information is credible before allowing it to be published. Newspaper articles, magazine articles, and scholarly journal articles all go through this process.

But just because something is printed, doesn’t automatically mean you should trust it. Consider the supermarket tabloids like the *Weekly World News*. Certainly that information source is suspect! Here are some other scenarios that should cause you to think more critically about what you read:

- Magazines accept advertising. In theory, journalists are not supposed to take this into account when writing an article criticizing a company or a product, but it is something that you as a reader should consider as a possibility.
- Newspapers, magazines, and television stations are now often owned by large entertainment companies (for example, Time Warner owns *Time Magazine*, CNN, HBO, New Line Cinema, AOL, and Warner Bros., *Sports Illustrated*, and Warner Books). Think about that the next time you read a review of a new album, book, movie, or television show.
- Even scholarly journals are not exempt. In the mid-1990’s, Alan Sokal wrote an article that was complete nonsense which passed the peer-review process and was published in a scholarly journal.

Just because you find information on the Web does not mean it is automatically false NOR does it mean you can automatically trust it. It needs to be critically evaluated just as any printed source, and in some cases even MORE critically since many websites have no editor or reviewers. There are many websites which are completely fictitious.

Below are some questions that can guide you through the process of thinking critically about the information source you are considering using. Keep in mind that this process may take some time. It isn’t necessary to answer all the questions, but it is important that you think through them before using ANY source of information from a book, to a website to an “expert” whom you interview.

<b>AUTHORITY</b>	
<b>Questions to Ask</b>	<b>Finding the Answers</b>
Who is the author?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look at the Title page (book or report)</li> <li>• Title information at the top of the first page (articles or book chapters)</li> <li>• End of the article (encyclopedias)</li> <li>• Top or bottom of page (web pages)</li> </ul>
What are the author’s credentials? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant university degree</li> <li>• Institutional affiliation (where does he/she work?)</li> <li>• Relevant field or employment experience</li> <li>• Past writings on same subject</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look in biographical sources</li> <li>• Look in directories, e.g. Who’s Who or National Faculty Directory (Ekstrom Ref. Desk L901 .N34 for latest edition)</li> <li>• Search the web for author’s home page</li> <li>• Search article indexes or the online catalog for other works by that author</li> </ul>

<p>What is the author's reputation among his/her peers?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cited in articles, books, or bibliographies on the topic</li> <li>• Mentioned in your textbook or by your professor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look in annual reviews</li> <li>• Use citation indexes to find articles citing your author such as Web of Science</li> <li>• Talk to your professor</li> </ul>
<p>Who is the publisher?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commercial, trade, institutional, other</li> <li>• Known for quality and/or scholarly publications</li> <li>• Basic values or goals</li> <li>• Specialization</li> <li>• Editorial Board</li> <li>• Blind review process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look in directories, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Writer's Market (Ekstrom Ref. Desk PN161 .W83 for latest edition)</li> <li>▪ Literary Marketplace</li> <li>▪ Directory of Corporate Affiliations (HG4057 .A219)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Search the web for the publishers web site</li> <li>• Look for editorial guidelines or author instructions in journals or on the publishers web site</li> </ul>
<p>Is the author associated with a reputable institution or organization?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization mission</li> <li>• Basic values or goals</li> <li>• National or international membership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Search the web for the organization's web site</li> <li>• Look in directories, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Encyclopedia of Associations (Ekstrom Ref. Desk AS22 .E5 for latest edition)</li> <li>▪ Research Centers Directory (Ekstrom Ref. Desk AS25 .R47 for latest edition)</li> <li>▪ The Left Guide: a Guide to Left-of-Center Organizations (Ekstrom Ref. JX 1250 .L447 1996)</li> <li>▪ The Right Guide: a Guide to Conservative and Right of Center Organizations (Law Library Ref. HS 2321 .R54)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>OBJECTIVITY</b>	
<p>Does the author state the goals for this publication?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inform, explain, educate</li> <li>• Advocate</li> <li>• Persuade or dissuade</li> <li>• Sell a product or service</li> <li>• Serve as a soapbox</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the foreword, preface, abstract and/or introduction</li> <li>• Look for reviews of the work in article indexes.</li> </ul>
<p>Does the author exhibit a particular bias?</p> <p>What assumptions does the author make?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commitment to a point of view</li> <li>• Acknowledgement of bias</li> <li>• Presentation of facts and arguments for both sides of a controversial issue</li> <li>• Language free of emotion-arousing words and bias.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read the abstract and/or introduction</li> <li>• Examine the work for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inflammatory language, images or graphic styles (boldface, italics to make a point or indicate sarcasm)</li> <li>▪ Propaganda</li> <li>▪ Author's arguments or supporting facts</li> <li>▪ Author's conclusions</li> <li>▪ Bibliography that includes multiple points of view</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<p>Is the viewpoint of the author's affiliation reflected in the message or content?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organization's point of view on the topic being discussed</li> <li>• Organization's mission and activities</li> <li>• Advertising is clearly labeled</li> <li>• Benefits to the organization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Search the web for the organization's web site</li> <li>• Look in directories, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The Encyclopedia of Associations (Ekstrom Ref. Desk AS22 .E5 for latest edition)</li> <li>▪ Research Centers Directory (Ekstrom Ref. Desk AS25 .R47 for latest edition)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reasonable assumptions and conclusions</li> <li>• Arguments and conclusions supported by evidence that is verifiable</li> <li>• Opposing points of view addressed</li> <li>• Opinions not disguised as facts</li> <li>• Authoritative sources cited.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Verify facts and statistics with a reliable source</li> <li>• Examine cited sources for authority and objectivity</li> </ul>
<b>QUALITY</b>	
<p>Is the information well-organized?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Logical structure</li> <li>• Main points clearly presented</li> <li>• Main ideas unified by overarching idea</li> <li>• Text flows well (not choppy or stilted)</li> <li>• Author's argument is not repetitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look at the headings to indicate structure</li> <li>• Look for agreement among reviews</li> <li>• Magazines for Libraries (Ekstrom Ref. Desk PN4832 .M34 for latest edition)</li> <li>• Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory (Ref. Z6941 .U52)</li> <li>• Book reviews</li> <li>• Internet Scout Report</li> </ul>
<p>Has author used good grammar? Are there spelling or typographical errors?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read carefully for errors</li> </ul>
<p>Are the graphics (images, tables, charts, diagrams) appropriate and clearly presented?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clearly labeled</li> <li>• Descriptive title</li> <li>• Understandable without explanatory text</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider other ways to present the information</li> </ul>
<b>COVERAGE</b>	
<p>Does the work update other sources?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compare publication dates and content to other sources you have found</li> </ul>
<p>Does it substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You should seek out multiple points of view and include a diversity of sources and ideas</li> </ul>
<p>Have you found enough information to support your arguments?</p>	<p>Look for gaps in your arguments and evidence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facts</li> <li>• Statistics</li> <li>• Evidence</li> </ul>

<b>CURRENCY</b>	
When was it published?	Look for a publication or copyright date on the <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Title page (books, journals)</li> <li>• Reverse of the title page (books)</li> <li>• Cover (journals, magazines, newspapers)</li> <li>• Table of contents (journals, magazines)</li> <li>• Bottom of page (web sites)</li> </ul> Dates on web pages may indicate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When the page was created</li> <li>• When the page was published on the web</li> <li>• When the page was last revised</li> </ul>
Is your topic one that requires current information?	Topic areas requiring the most up-to-date information may include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Science</li> <li>• Medicine</li> <li>• Current events</li> </ul>
Has this source been revised, updated, or expanded in a later edition?	Search catalogs and other databases for more recent editions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worldcat</li> <li>• Books In Print</li> <li>• Amazon.com</li> </ul>
<b>RELEVANCE</b>	
Does the work address your research question or meet the requirements of your assignment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review your research question and/or assignment</li> </ul>
Is the content appropriate for your research topic or assignment? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scholarly vs. popular</li> <li>• Fact vs. opinion</li> <li>• Format/medium (e.g. book, journal, website, etc.)</li> <li>• Subject coverage</li> <li>• Language</li> <li>• Time period</li> <li>• Geographical area</li> <li>• Audience</li> <li>• Primary vs. Secondary</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check the table of contents or scan the subheadings</li> <li>• Read the preface, abstract, introduction, and/or conclusion</li> <li>• Look for footnotes or endnotes and/or a bibliography</li> <li>• Look for reviews</li> <li>• Magazines for Libraries (Ekstrom Ref. Desk PN4832 .M34 for latest edition)</li> <li>• Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory (Ref. Z6941 .U52)</li> <li>• Book reviews</li> <li>• Internet Scout Report</li> </ul>