Evaluating Sources to Find Quality Research

Here are three questions you can ask to determine whether a source is a good fit for your needs. Your needs depend on the types of evidence you are looking for, the points you want to make, and the requirements of your assignment.

Question #1: Who wrote this and are they trustworthy?

When you’re looking at a source, find out who wrote it. What makes them trustworthy or not? What about their background gives them expertise?

Expertise can mean many things:

- Education
- Professional experience
- Life experience
- Significant research and interviewing (like a journalist does)

You might find the author’s qualifications listed within the source. On many websites, the author’s name is a clickable link. If not, you might want to do a web search for the author’s name. Ask yourself why you might or might not trust them.

Question #2: What biases (of the source or publication) exist?

A bias is a prejudice in favor of or against something. It’s impossible to write something totally free of bias – everything has a perspective – but some sources try to acknowledge multiple sides of an issue and others do not.
What is the source’s purpose? Is it trying to convince you of something? To inform? To sell you something? To get you to take action?

Look at the “About” page of the publication or website in which the source appeared. Is there any obvious bias? You can also do a web search for the publication name to learn about its reputation (many magazines and newspapers have Wikipedia pages).

Bias doesn’t necessarily make a source bad, but you need to determine whether the bias affects the accuracy of the information.

**Question #3: What sources does the author use?**

Where is the author getting their information from? If you can’t tell, what reason do you have for trusting that information?

You may find a list of sources at the end of an article or web page. Often, for magazine and newspaper articles, the sources will be woven into the article itself, sometimes as links, sometimes not. Look for studies they are citing data from, interviews they did, and other places where they used information. Is it information you’d be likely to trust?

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