My Learning Essentials

Finding the good stuff: Evaluating your sources

CHEAT SHEET

www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/mle/evaluating-sources
Thinking like a detective is a good way to approach evaluating the sources you use.

Through asking questions, you can begin to establish the reliability, objectivity and relevance of the evidence you find.

**Reliability:** How trustworthy is the evidence?
There needs to be a good reason to believe that the information presented is accurate and complete in order for a source to be considered reliable.

**Objectivity:** How neutral is the evidence?
Note that a source doesn't need to be objective for you to use it in your work. In some cases, you may be seeking sources from a particular perspective to illustrate a point, or provide a counter-argument. However, it is important that you are aware of any bias when using a source.

**Relevance:** How applicable is the evidence?
A source can be reliable, objective and of a generally high quality, but if it's not relevant to your work then there's no point in using it. Does it illustrate a point you are making, or provide a counter-argument? It needs to be relevant in some way to the rest of your research to be worth using.
Six honest serving men

I keep six honest serving-men

(They taught me all I knew);

Their names are

What and Why and When

How and Where and Who

-from THE ELEPHANT'S CHILD by RUDYARD KIPLING
...type of source is it? The format of the source may give some indication of its quality

...are the main arguments of the source?

**Reliability**
Has the information been verified in any way?
For example, peer-reviewed journal articles and academic books are likely to be more reliable than a lot of information published on the web.

**Objectivity**
Does the information in the source cohere with other sources you have read? If you find a source that is dramatically different from your other readings, this may indicate a bias.

**Relevance**
What is the content of the information in the source? Is this relevant to your other research?
...was it produced?

**Reliability**

Does the purpose of the source influence its reliability?

If it's designed for persuasion or advertising, the information presented may be incomplete or not totally accurate.

**Objectivity**

Was the source created to persuade, sell, entertain, inform, or for another purpose?

Does the purpose of the source influence the objectivity of the information?

**Relevance**

Was it produced in response to a particular event, time or situation?

Does this have an impact on the relevance of the information?
...was it published or last updated?

**Reliability**
If it's a website, has it been updated recently?

If not, this could impact on the overall reliability of the author or organisation, as well as the relevance of the information.

**Objectivity**
Is there any bias about the piece relating to when it was written or produced?

If it was written in the aftermath of a particular event, this could influence the author's perspective.

**Relevance**
Is it recent?

If not, does that impact on how relevant the information is to your own work? This will vary according to your subject; some areas of research are more fast-moving than others.
...was it published?

**Reliability**
Was it published in an academic journal? If so, it's likely to be more reliable than things published on the open web.

If it's a website, what is the URL? Certain domains (eg .org, .gov, .edu or .ac.uk) can be an indication that the site is from a reputable institution.

**Objectivity**
If it's a newspaper article, which paper was it published in? Most UK newspapers have some political allegiance, which will affect the objectivity of the information. [This Wikipedia article](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_orientation_of_UK_newspapers) gives a good overview of the political orientation of British newspapers.

**Relevance**
Is it UK-based or international?

Does the geographical context impact upon the relevance of the information?
Where...

...was it produced?

**Reliability**
Does the purpose of the source influence its reliability?

If it's designed for persuasion or advertising, the information presented may be incomplete or not totally accurate.

**Objectivity**
Was the source created to persuade, sell, entertain, inform, or for another purpose?

Does the purpose of the source influence the objectivity of the information?

**Relevance**
Was it produced in response to a particular event, time or situation?

Does this have an impact on the relevance of the information?
Who...

...wrote or produced the source? This could prompt some investigation into the author...

...is the target audience for the source?

**Reliability**
What are the author's credentials? Have they written anything else in this area?

Are they qualified to be writing on this topic?

**Objectivity**
Is the author objective, or do they have an agenda or bias?

Is it an independent author, or are they writing on behalf of an organisation?

Is the author affiliated to any organisations that may affect their objectivity?

**Relevance**
What audience was the source produced for?

Does this affect its relevance?
We have examined a method for evaluating your sources, based around the six questions:

- What
- Why
- When
- How
- Where
- Who

You should now know how to ask these questions to establish the **reliability**, **objectivity** and **relevance** of the evidence you find.

**Practice** applying this method to sources and it will soon become **second nature**.
Keep in touch!

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Related resources

1. Know your sources: types of information
2. Knowing where to look: your search toolkit
3. Finding the good stuff: evaluating your sources