

Handout # 3: Evaluating Your Information

ALL INFORMATION IS *NOT* CREATED EQUALLY

You need to think critically about every book, article, web page or other resource you find. Is it relevant? Is the quality high enough? The answer often depends on the type of project (see *What Kind of Information Do You Need?*) You can easily find many Web pages that have misleading or plain bad information since anyone can publish on the Web – but at the same time, just because you find information on the Web, it doesn't mean that you should always discount it!

You may want to check:

Author

- What are the author's credentials (education, current position, etc.)?
- Is the author qualified to write about the topic?
- Although a writer who specializes in history may be knowledgeable in other areas, is she a reliable source for information on brain surgery?

Some tools to check:

- *Biography.com* (<http://www.biography.com>) [free]
- *Biography and Genealogy Master Index* [GaleNet database – check your library]
- *Biography Resource Center* [OCLC FirstSearch database – check your library]

Special Web Considerations: Since anyone can publish on the Web, does the author provide any credentials? Is she or he well-known in his or her field? Is the writer affiliated with an organization such as a university, government, or institute? If there is no individual name, can you tell who is responsible? (Hint: look for links to an organization or .edu, .gov, or .org in the URL). The number of hits for the author's name may mean only that she or he has put a lot of pages up!

Date of Publication

The importance of being current depends on your particular project. Science and technology generally require more current information than humanities and in some social sciences (where older material may provide important research data). For books, the date is usually on the back (*verso*) of the title page (if you see more than one date, your book may be a reprint; updated editions will usually say so)

Special Web Consideration: Most reliable websites will say when they were created, but they may also contain older information.

Publisher/Authority

For both print and Web materials, you may or may not recognize the publisher – there are thousands of publishers from small presses to major publishing houses such as Random House. In general, University presses publish scholarly works. Others may be well known in certain fields. You may wish to consult the *Literary Market Place: LMP*, an annual directory of publishers.

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Publisher/Authority (continued)

For Web materials, look for information about the organization responsible for publishing – if the author is affiliated with an organization and publishing officially endorsed material, you will probably see links to the organization. A general rule of thumb for order of web publisher authority (for US websites) is:

1. .gov
2. .edu
3. .org
4. .com

Journal Title

If you are looking at periodicals, you need to know whether the journal is scholarly, popular or trade because the type of journal indicates a level of research and the author's credibility (see the guide **What Kind of Information Do You Need?** for the differences between each type).

Intended Audience

Like the types of journals, the material may be aimed at a certain audience. Is it the general public? Others in the field? Experts? The popular works may not be scholarly enough for your project, but you may have trouble wading through something written for experts.

Bias

Is the material presented in an objective way? Sometimes you may have to read something very carefully to separate objective research from propaganda. Does the author present a particular point of view? Does he or she make this clear? Does he or she provide sources and can you verify them? Does the author use racist or insulting terms?

Content

- Is the information from a primary or secondary source? (see the guide **What Kind of Information Do You Need?** for additional help)
- Does it cover your topic in a helpful way? Or is it only marginally relevant? What is the scope of the work – does it provide background information or focus on a particular area?
- Does it verify information you found in other sources?

Special Web Considerations:

- Is the material free of spelling errors and typos?
- What is the source of information? Does the author cite sources and can you verify them?
- Is there advertising surrounding the text? Does it influence the material? Is the material part of an ad or promotional material?
- Is the material up-to-date? If not, can you tell if it was intentional?

Reviews

You may find evaluative reviews helpful in evaluating books. They are usually written by experts in the field and can guide you to the best information available in books. In addition to reviewing the particular book, reviews may also note other important related works. *Book Review Digest* is a good electronic index.