7. Evaluating information

*In this chapter*
- Why evaluate?
- Identifying your information need
- Evaluation criteria
- Evaluating information content
- Evaluating World Wide Web resources

Up to this point you have learned how to prepare yourself for library research and learned the basic methods of finding information. This chapter will help you learn the basics of evaluating information. Your ability to evaluate information is very important. The skills you learn here will be useful in every aspect of your personal life, professional life, and as a consumer.

**Why evaluate?**

Evaluation is one aspect of thinking critically. In today's world, you need to sort through large amounts of information. You need to identify reliable sources of information. You need to discriminate between fact and interpretation, what is true and false, what is possible and impossible, and what is probable and doubtful. You need to identify bias and learn how to question the quality of information. It is through the method of *questioning* that you are introduced to the evaluation of information.

**Tip**

Evaluation is not necessarily difficult; however, there are a lot of questions to consider and it takes time before it becomes second nature. The key point is to keep doing it — the more you evaluate and critically think about information, the easier it gets. Be aware that you are learning the basics of evaluation, which can be applied to most information you encounter. There are also evaluation techniques in specific fields of study, which require specialized analytical methods and are beyond the scope of this handbook.
Identifying your information need

Before you attempt to evaluate information, you need to be clear about what information you need. The following questions will help you identify your information need.

Checklist of questions

- Do you want general or specialized information?
- What is the central focus of your information need?
- How much information do you want to gather?
- For what purpose do you need the information - speech, debate, term paper, thesis/dissertation, article, book, etc.?
- What coverage do you need?
  - **Time**: current, historical, both.
  - **Geography**: local, regional, national or international.
  - **Specificity**: general or detailed.
  - **Point of view**: single point of view, opposing points of view, or a range of viewpoints.
  - **Comprehensiveness**: overviews/summaries, news or popular writing, in-depth research.
  - **Complete or abridged information**: published in its entirety or published in an abbreviated or abridged version.

Evaluation criteria

The following criteria are key points to consider when evaluating whether a source of information is suitable for your research. The accompanying questions will help you apply the criteria.

Authority and reliability

The credibility or reliability of the author and publisher are primary considerations when evaluating a source of information. Would you take medication from a non-reputable manufacturer or advice from a doctor without knowing the person's credentials? Probably not. The same is true with information. You need to know if the information is coming from a reliable author and publisher.

**Author**

- Is the author identified? The author is the person or organization responsible for the work and may be an individual, corporation, or sponsoring agency, such as a professional association.
- Are the author's credentials given? Credentials include the author's occupation/position, education, and experience.

**Publisher**

- What is the type of publisher? Is the publisher a university/academic, professional, government, trade, or
commercial press? What type of material does it publish: scholarly, trade, news, popular, or sensational?

- Does the publisher require that the information be edited, reviewed, or refereed (for example: "refereed journal")? If it's a university press publication, the information contained in the book has been reviewed prior to publication. (Keep in mind, though, that not everyone will agree with what the author says.) If it is a "trade" publication, that is, a commercial publication, there may be no way to know how complete or reliable the information is. Ask a librarian if you have doubts. Some trade publishers have good reputations, others do not.

**Resources to help you evaluate authors**

The reference tools listed below will help you get started checking the credibility and reliability of an author. For more suggested reference sources, consult the Bibliography of this handbook.

- Use biographical sources to find information about a person.
  - *Contemporary Authors*
  - *Current Biography Yearbook*
  - *Biography Index*

- Use book review, essay, and periodical indexes to find critical reviews of the author's writings or other works.
  - *Book Review Index*
  - *Book Review Digest*
  - *Academic Search Premier*

- Use library catalogs and periodical indexes to determine what other works the author has written.
  - *Hawaii Voyager Library Catalog*
  - *Academic Search Premier*

- Use citation indexes to determine if others cite the author's work. The following citation indexes are available through the Web of Science databases.
  - *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*
  - *Social Sciences Citation Index*
  - *Science Citation Index*

**Audience**

- Who is the intended audience? Is it popular, professional, or academic?
- What is the level of the presented information? Elementary versus highly technical?

**Validity**

- Are the sources of information used in the work cited and verifiable?
- Is the information accurate? Can you spot errors?
EVALUATING INFORMATION

Is the information presented with objectivity or can you identify a bias?

**Currency**

Is the information timely for your topic? When was the information created/published/compiled? Is the information regularly updated and how often? Is the information still valid for your topic? Note that some information does not go out-of-date.

**Scope**

Does the information cover your topic adequately? Note that this section parallels the section on "Identifying your information need."

- **Time**: current, historical, both
- **Geography**: local, regional, national or international
- **Specificity**: general or detailed
- **Point of view**: single point of view, opposing points of view, or a range of viewpoints
- **Comprehensiveness**: overviews/summaries, in-depth research (encyclopedia articles, news articles, research articles, books, dissertations).
- **Complete or abridged information**: published in its entirety or published in an abbreviated or abridged version.

**Primary, secondary, tertiary**

Is the information a primary, secondary source, or tertiary source (see page 3-3)? Primary sources include raw data, diaries, letters, manuscripts, and original accounts of events. Secondary sources include information that has been analyzed and interpreted. Tertiary sources are based on secondary sources and often summarize and explain research in a field for non-specialists.

**Format**

Is the information in the most appropriate format for your topic?

**Tip**

Sometimes you do not know if a piece of information is appropriate until you have looked at it thoroughly. You may need to hang on to certain information well into the research process, deciding later whether or not you really need it.
Evaluating information content

Evaluating the information content is one of the most challenging aspects of evaluation. You can be exposed to almost anything and this tests the breadth and depth of your knowledge about a topic and your ability to analyze and assess information.

Important considerations when evaluating the information content are the accuracy of the information and the validity of the arguments. A complete discussion of how to evaluate the content of research reports and other types of writing is beyond the scope of this handbook.

Evaluating World Wide Web resources

Anyone with computer resources can create a web site. There is no regulated control over the quality of information on the World Wide Web. It is up to the researcher to evaluate and select suitable web resources.

The evaluation criteria that are applied to any source of information should also be applied to sources on the World Wide Web. There are some special considerations, however, when evaluating web resources.

Type of web site

The web address (or URL for Uniform Resource Locator) provides clues to the type of web site. The URL for the University of Hawaii, for example, is http://www.hawaii.edu/. The last part of the URL often gives a general indication of the type of web site. In the UH address, .edu indicates that it is a web site for an educational organization. You will often encounter these codes in web addresses:

- aero - aviation industry
- biz - businesses
- com - commercial organizations
- coop - business cooperatives
- edu - educational organizations
- gov - government agencies
- info - informational sites
- org - nonprofit and research organizations
- name - individual
- net - internet-related organizations
- mil - military organizations
- museum - museums
- pro - professionals
- tilde (~) - personal web page

When you see a web address ending in .com, for example, you know that the site is for a commercial organization. Although
business sites may contain useful information, you need to be aware that the organization may be trying to sell you something and the information you find might be filtered to suit the needs of the business. When you see a tilde (~) in the URL, this often indicates a personal web site.

Authority and verifiability

It should be clear from the web site, who is responsible for the information content and what the sources of information are. If these are not clear, it may be a warning about the reliability of the web site. Furthermore, because it is easy to move from web page to web page following links, it is necessary to make sure that sources of information are clearly indicated and verifiable between and among linked pages.

Stability of information

It is very easy to change information content on web sites. Web sites themselves may suddenly appear and disappear. It should be clearly indicated on the web site when it was produced and when the information on it is updated or revised.

Summary

Evaluating information is one of the most important skills you can learn. You have learned why it is important to evaluate information. You have learned criteria and techniques by which to evaluate information resources. You have also considered issues specific to evaluating information resources on the World Wide Web.

Workshop

Activities

1. Choose one of the authors below and determine his or her area of expertise using biographical sources, the library catalog, and periodical and book review indexes.
   — Martin Marty
   — Camille Paglia
   — Gloria Steinem
   — Theodore Roszak
2. Assume you are writing a research paper on violence in television. Locate the following article in Academic Search Premier and evaluate it to determine whether it is an appropriate source for scholarly research.


3. Assume you are writing a research paper on violence in television. Access the following web page and evaluate it to determine whether it is an appropriate source for scholarly research.

— http://www.apa.org/topics/topicviolence.html

Questions

1. What kinds of sources can you use to find credentials and other biographical information about an author?

2. How can you find reviews of books written by an author?

3. What could you learn about an author by searching the library catalog and periodical indexes?

4. How can a URL help you evaluate a web site?

5. What are some special considerations when evaluating web sites?

6. Why is it especially important to evaluate information found on the web?

7. What are three basic questions to ask yourself when evaluating web pages?